



THE FRINGE OF THE DESERT

*A NOVEL BY
R.S. MACNAMARA*



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THE
FRINGE
OF
THE
DESERT

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

SEED OF FIRE

SPINNERS IN SILENCE

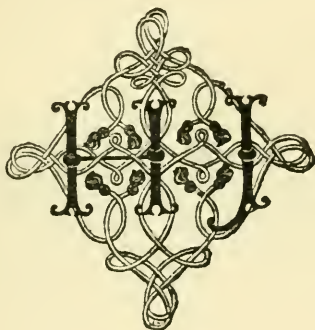
ETC., ETC.

THE FRINGE OF THE DESERT

A
NOVEL

BY

RACHEL SWETE MACNAMARA



"AND THE WISE MAN SAID 'THOSE WHO LOVE
WITH PASSION STAND UPON THE FRINGE
OF THE DESERT,' AND THEY WHO HEARD
LAUGHED AND PASSED ON THEIR WAY"

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TO

T. E. M.

BECAUSE SHE LIKED IT AND
BELIEVED IN IT, AND BECAUSE
OF A CERTAIN GREY NOVEMBER
MORNING, I DEDICATE THIS BOOK



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PART I
THE MOTHER



THE FRINGE OF THE DESERT

CHAPTER I

“ UNKNOWN, UNKISSED ”

HILDRED IVORS leaned back against the cushion of the railway carriage, and looked through the window with unseeing eyes.

In vain for her Spring lit the green fires of April in hedge and woodland, or woke the orchards to a blush of rose half-hidden in the virginal veil of pear or cherry-bloom: in vain the shepherd wind drove flocks of cloud-sheep across a field of blue as vivid in colour as the grass of the daisied meadows beneath, where here and there some ancient smock-frocked Lubin guarded woolly mothers and frolicsome lambs, whose caprices brought a faint echo of the footsteps of long ago Aprils dancing through the cobwebbed corridors of his memory—an echo which evoked a vision of a curly head, perhaps, or a plump pink cheek, the flash of an eye or the roundness of a trim waist, to be dismissed with a shake of a grizzled head and a “ Dust to dust ! ”—together with an entire forgetfulness of the fact that out of the dust of dead yesterdays are born the young Aprils of to-day.

In vain Spring tried to show the girl how she had come to the towns ; how she had touched the murky trees and wakened the dingy back-gardens to a burgeoning of yellow, and purple, and white ; how here the wind played the piper as he set the quaint shapes on the clothes-lines dancing with a careless abandon which was only restrained from full flight by the capturing clothes-pins ; how he hummed and sang among the telegraph wires which rose and fell by the side of the rushing train, burnished as gossamer threads in the sunshine. The swaying and interlacing of the glistening wires caught and held Hildred's attention, for an instant vaguely piercing through the cloud of thought which enwrapped her, but only for an instant. Nature, Spring, the sweet influences of her own youth were swept aside by the obsession of her thoughts, of her new responsibilities, of her recently acquired knowledge.

She had, of course, always known that her parents did not live together. It was an accepted fact of her childhood, unquestioned if occasionally wondered at.

Her father, Ingram Ivors, the celebrated painter of Eastern life, whose subtle harmonious pictures were always boldly signed " Ego ! " wintered in Egypt and summered in various blue and sunfilled places, as his chest was delicate. The dry air of the East, so she had been led to believe, did not suit her mother, who had a cottage at Burnaby ; and the responsibilities of parenthood apparently agreed with neither.

Money, the great non-essential, had not been lacking ; Hildred had never known material want. Affection, too, had warmed her young life, for the two

elderly cousins with whom she had lived since she was five years old, had done their best to fill the pitiful gaps of which the child was unaware. The Misses Dering, mutual cousins of her father and mother, while disapproving of the conduct of the Ivors, had tried, in their gentle conventional way, to create in Hildred's mind an atmosphere of tenderness through which their figures should loom mellow and devoid of disfiguring angles ; but unless such an atmosphere be sun-illuminated it is prone to thicken into fog. The fog had always obscured her mother, save for a stilted letter at Christmas-time in which a cheque was the medium of remembrance between her and hers sincerely—H. D. Ivors. The slip of paper crackled aggressively in Hildred's ears : it whispered of an irksome duty well fulfilled if only the amount despatched were sufficiently large.

There had been a lifting once which had revealed her father, a figure of some personal charm, who had taken her to the Zoo and the National Gallery, feasted her on chocolates and ice-cream, lavished expensive trifles on her, and parted from her with an ill-concealed air of relief.

" My mother sends me cheques which hiss at me, and my father gives me money which clinks like a bite," thought the child Hildred. " What did I ever do to make them dislike me so much ? "

She had asked Cousin Antoinette the question, but Miss Dering had the old-fashioned belief that what is ignored is invisible, and therefore by a circuitous process of reasoning becomes non-existent : besides she was loyal to those who had reposed the trust of

the child in her, so she made some vaguely non-committal answer.

"I suppose it is because I was born at all," Hildred had pursued, unsatisfied. "I suppose some people don't like children to be born."

"Hildred, it is God who sends the children," said Miss Antoinette.

"I wonder why on earth He sent me," returned Hildred, and had to learn a very long collect for irreverence.

The fog closed round her father again; Hildred felt that it would have lifted occasionally if she had been beautiful or even pretty. She came to this conclusion without rancour, accepting it rather as a natural fact than a tangible source of grievance, for young as she had been at their meeting, she realised that in her father's eyes the supreme duty of woman was to be beautiful: his other requirements of the sex, as a sex, she had yet to discover.

The Misses Dering carefully superintended her education; morally, mentally, and physically her development had progressed as far as their limitations allowed. She had had a year in Germany, a year in Italy, and a year in France, and she had returned to her cousins' house in Essex, prepared to settle down, for a summer at least, to the ordinary holiday life of the ordinary English girl. For the winter she had the germ of plans which were yet to mature.

And lo! on her twentieth birthday a bombshell! Her placid, delightfully-ordered existence was over, and she came into contact with hitherto hidden principalities and powers.

The bombshell took the innocent, if unexpected, form of a letter from her mother. It was undated, as it had been enclosed in one sent to Miss Dering the previous Christmas, with a request that she would give it to Hildred on her twentieth birthday—" which is some time in April, I believe." Strange irony that the Festival of the Christ Child, the season of peace and goodwill, should be the only date on which Mrs. Ivors remembered the existence of her own rejected offspring ! The letter ran—

" WHITECOT, BURNABY.

" DEAR HILDRED,

" Your father and I, though we differed on many points, agreed on one thing, the subject of your education. You have had every chance of development ; you have seen a good deal of the world, and you ought by this time to be fitted to have the ordering of your own life. We—— " (the conjunction seemed incredible to Hildred), " have made no claims upon you hitherto, but we decided years ago that when you attained the age of twenty you were to divide between us the last year of your dependent life. You will, therefore, come to me for six months as soon as you conveniently can. In the autumn you are to go to your father for six months, at the end of which period you will be free to choose for yourself. You will be at liberty to live with either of us, if you wish, or to follow some individual career of your own choosing. An adequate provision will be made for you in either case.

" Let me know what day and hour you will arrive.

There is a good train which reaches Burnaby at about five. Don't forget to change at Ledwych.

"Yours sincerely,

"H. D. IVORS."

Phrases from this curious letter set themselves to the recurrent beat of the wheel-music, as the train bore Hildred to her destination. The days since its arrival seemed dreamlike, unreal. Her known world had tumbled in chaos about her: what strange Phoenix was to rise from the ashes of her dreams?

There was no possibility of appeal; she had not been asked, she had been ordered to go. It was not as if the reproachful ghosts of the unclaimed years had stirred remorse or regret in either parent. No, there was no savour of sweetness in this command. It was the result of long laid-aside concurrence: Fate had had her in a net throughout these happy careless-seeming years—a vast invisible net, of which she suddenly felt the mesh.

A dull resentment burned in the girl's heart as she looked at the flying landscape with unseeing eyes. What did she owe of the duty and affection inculcated by Cousin Antoinette to either parent?

"We decided"—"You will therefore come"—"We decided"—"You will therefore come." The puppet words beat again and again upon her brain. *They* pulled the strings, first her mother and then her father, and she must dance as they wished. Well, they should see what sort of a tune she would dance to! She set her lips in a hard line: then her mood melted a little. After all, nothing had been asked of her. If they had

not given throughout these past years, which now loomed magical through a glow of rose, neither had they demanded anything. It should not be too difficult to be a polite and considerate guest for a time in the house of this stranger-woman, supposing that both ignored realities and claimed no more or no less than mutual courtesy.

She had that happy faculty, which belongs but to youth and the grasshopper-natured, of living absolutely in the present and curtaining the doors of the future so that neither sight nor sound could penetrate to disturb.

As for her father, his—" She has not even a feature ! " still rang in her ears with so loud a clangour as to drown any memory of his subsequent charm. He still was behind the curtain. So be it.

Yet there were undeniable charms in the face, which at its fledgling worst " had not even a feature." There was much to attract in the steadfast look of the thickly-lashed grey eyes, in the soft fair hair, in the clear pure skin. If the nose were blunt rather than Grecian it was not ill formed, and if the mouth were not curved enough for beauty no meannesses lurked in its firm lines. Hildred's face was square rather than oval, and the contour of the cheek and chin showed sense and determination. If a compensating softness lay in her eyes the fringe of brown lashes made the discovery difficult. Long ago she had learnt to keep her fancies and feelings to herself: an unchildlike reticence had been superimposed upon a frank and fearless nature, and the years, in thus disciplining her, had taught her self-reliance also. Hildred's eyes and lips kept her

vague girl-secrets well. The Misses Dering never guessed at the insurgent soul behind the barrier of calm words and ways.

They considered dear Hildred placid and reliable, adaptable and affectionate, one to be led by the lightest whisper of those in authority—a classification to which Hildred's firm lips and somewhat obstinate chin gave an emphatic denial.

She thought over the phrasing of her mother's letter as she leaned her head back against the fawn-coloured cushions: the unsoftened bluntness, the terse command, the clear decision of every word. Immutable as Fate, drained of the faintest essence of personal desire or emotion, it seemed to Hildred that the only individual note in the whole letter was struck by the three business-like sentences at its end. The curt directions as to train-times and changes premised at least a human being, not an aloof spinner of the threads of destiny.

The train whistled, slackened, stopped at Ledwych Junction.

Hildred rose with reluctance, her supposed freedom shackled by another link in the unseen chain.

The train for Burnaby stood waiting at a distant platform, puffing with a fussy importance, though ten minutes should elapse before its departure. Hildred chose an empty carriage and her favoured corner, opened a magazine and glanced at its pages: then let it fall listlessly upon her lap, her thoughts too busy with the tide of her own affairs to take even a passing interest in any romance of fiction.

Presently she looked at her watch to see how much solitude yet remained to her.

“ The train is due to start,” she thought. “ Evidently they are not particular as to time on these small branch lines. I have half an hour left still, thank goodness.”

At the moment there was a bustle on the platform, a stirring of the waters of peace which had engulfed the station with the departure of the London Express ; and to Hildred’s annoyance two people were ushered into her compartment by an officious porter. At least she now considered him officious, although in his attendance on her she had thought him both civil and obliging. So much for the point of view.

She glanced at the newcomers with some interest. Her years in foreign countries had cured her of the average English person’s detestation of the society of his unknown fellow-beings either at home or abroad. Her present resentment at the invasion of her solitude was more for the occasion than the event. As people they interested her : as intruders she could have dispensed with them.

“ Unmistakably ‘ county,’ ” was her rapid mental summing-up. “ No one but an English county lady would dare to wear those boots and those rough tweeds on a day like this. There is the courage of centuries behind that hairdressing, too—that calm conviction of being of the salt of the earth which makes one rise superior to such follies as fashion. The man is evidently her husband. His clothes and air spell turnips. Probably he never reads anything but the *Times* and a sporting paper. Yet they look nice somehow, and wholesome and open-air. I wonder if my mother is anything like that.”

She had never even seen a photograph of Mrs. Ivors. Early questioning had only elicited from Miss Dering the facts that she had been as "straight as a rush," and had had "a fresh complexion." The same description could easily be applied to the woman opposite, whose face had a somewhat hard, weather-beaten look which added several years to her toll of thirty-two.

Presently she began to talk to her husband, at first in low tones, then, with a careless disregard of the unknown auditor, a little louder, with a crispness of enunciation which made non-hearing impossible. The husband answered and laughed, in what Hildred called to herself "a turnippy way"! The subject of their conversation was somebody named "Harry," whose doings they discussed with considerable freedom, ignoring the possibility of Hildred's having any acquaintance with the said Harry with the assured contempt of the said salt for those deemed in any way below it, or rather not of it. Hildred was not of it, decidedly. Even a cursory glance revealed an un-county-like smartness about her hat, hair and shoes. She looked "French," the lady had decided. That was enough. No one whom she knew could possibly be going to have a French-looking visitor. It was not even the season for changing governesses, she reflected, so with a complacent sense of security she continued to discuss the absent Harry's peculiarities.

Hildred only caught a word or two at first.

"Harry's latest—captaining a hockey-team at Mudford. Wouldn't play goal, if you please, too dull—should rush into the fray if the ball came near."

" Ball," murmured the husband. " Anythin' in the shape of a ball is in old Harry's line, except the sort you dance at." He chuckled, amused at his own joke. " That sort of ball isn't much in Harry's line, is it, old girl ? "

They both laughed, and with the cosmopolitan detachment of one who has spent three years among the capitals of Europe, and the hasty judgment of youth, Hildred decided that the average English person was ready to be amused by the veriest trifle in a way which showed a deplorable lack of a true sense of humour.

" Every kind of ball except the one," pursued the man. " Each in its season, hockey, tennis, croquet, golf, and what's the name of the thing that had such a run about ten years ago ? "

" Diabolo," suggested the wife.

" Diabolo isn't a ball, you goose ! No ; what was it ? Tiddley-winks—no, ping-pong. That's it."

The wife brightened. She sat up straighter in her corner, and laughed again as if at some reminiscence.

" Yes. I remember the ping-pong craze. It was before we were married. Harry was cracked about it and ransacked the parish to get people to play. First thing after breakfast and last thing at night Harry was at it if a partner was to be had. I, though I wasn't much good, was once commandeered. I remember the mannish look of the room, the cigarettes, the tantalus and siphons on the sideboard, the racquets and things all about the place. I remember I felt quite embarrassed, almost as if I was in a bachelor's rooms. It was very funny."

They both laughed, and Hildred wondered a little.

If Harry were not a bachelor, he must be either a married man or a widower. What was the point of the joke?

"Poor old Harry!" said the man. "Jack of all trades and master of none. It's the same at every game, so far and no farther. A bit of a failure, but a good old sporting sort all the same."

The train slackened at a small wayside station, and the two got out. Hildred saw them mount into a four-wheeled dog-cart which awaited them on the road outside, but the train moved on again before their departure, as the man was making determined enquiries of a rather agitated station-master.

"Some precious parcel that's missing." Hildred supposed with a slight curl of her lip. The episode of her travelling companions and the triviality of their conversation had served to divert the current of her thoughts for a time, and, as she looked at her watch and consulted the Bradshaw with which Miss Dering had presented her, she realised with a start that Burnaby was the next station, and that her train was due to arrive there in, to be precise, exactly two minutes.

She rose, put her magazine and Bradshaw back into her travelling-bag, took down her coat and umbrella from the rack, and waited in that painful readiness which every traveller knows. In Hildred's case the lagging moments were tintured with the balm of reprieve. Her hands felt cold: her heart beat in absurd irregular throbs: a mist of nervousness blurred the green landscape through which she was being borne to her fate.

"We decided—You will therefore come." Once

again the wheels in their turning beat out that refrain of command, in time, it seemed, to the beating of her heart. The train whistled and began to slow down.

“ What’s the use of being nervous ? ” she chid herself. “ It’s inevitable, and in a moment I shall know.”

The train stopped. With an effort the girl looked out of the window. With the exception of a few rustics the only person visible was a spare, dark-clad form at the far end of the platform.

Hildred got out and gave her bag to a porter. “ Yes, there are two trunks in the van and a hat-box,” she said. “ Is there any one to meet me ? I am Miss Ivors.”

“ Here’s Mrs. Ivors, miss,” answered the porter. “ Am I to fetch your boxes up to Whitecot presently ? ”

“ Wait a moment.”

Hildred turned to meet her mother, who had come near during the interlude.

“ You are Hildred, I suppose ? ” said Mrs. Ivors, holding out her hand. “ How do you do ? ”

“ Yes, I am Hildred,” replied the girl, taking it. “ I am very well, thank you.”

The same grey eyes, clear as rain, looked at each other from the opposing faces. It was a moment which should have been compact of emotion, the meeting of unknown mother with unknown daughter, but the air was charged with an electricity of conflict rather than communion, and there was a flash, as of steel, from glance to glance.

“ Straight as a rush ”—and as spare. Yes, that description still applied. The fresh complexion had become fixed in a dull red mesh, and the colourless

hair, once a soft brown, was cropped close as a man's, and surmounted by a man's straw hat with a black ribbon band. Mrs. Ivors was dressed in a dark grey coat and skirt, severely cut, a white shirt with a stiff collar fastened by a small black bow, which was pinned crooked, and black brogued shoes.

"I've told Johnny to bring up your boxes presently," she said. "We'll walk up to Whitecot. It's only a stone's throw. I hope you are a good walker."

She spoke with the air of one to whom social amenities came with difficulty, as she flashed a quick glance at Hildred's shoes.

The girl caught the glance, apprehending disparagement.

"I can do eight or ten miles a day," she returned, "and I have two pairs of strong boots in my box."

"Are you a golfer, by any chance?" asked Mrs. Ivors, with a glimmer of interest.

"No, I have never even seen it played."

"Ah. There are good links not far from Burnaby."

"Perhaps I could learn."

"It is always 'perhaps' as regards golf," said Mrs. Ivors, dubiously. "Even I, enthusiastic as I am, find it as disheartening as it is fascinating. Do you mind coming along this lane? It is a short cut to Whitecot, and I don't want to go through the village."

"I love short cuts," answered Hildred, feeling for the first time a faint spark of sympathy with her mother. She could well understand why she did not wish to go through the village with a hitherto unheard-of daughter in her train.

As they turned into the lane Mrs. Ivors pulled off her coat, and Hildred noticed that the stud had fallen out of the back of her collar, leaving a line of tanned neck exposed ; also that the end of the safety-pin which connected skirt and shirt protruded from beneath her black leather belt. It was a white safety-pin, too.

Conversation languished. There seemed nothing to say. The round world seemed suddenly empty of anything that could provoke remark. In silence they came to a gate, which Mrs. Ivors opened.

" Here we are," she said, with a sigh of unmistakable relief.

They entered an untidy place, shaggy of grass and overgrown of shrub, divided by a path once gravelled, but now beaten bare down the centre while the gravel lay in ridges on either side. Whitecot itself loomed in front of them, as coldly white-washed, as repellently bare as any wind-swept coastguard station.

The hall door stood open. There was no sign of life about the place. Hildred, sensitive to impressions, felt as if this was unusual. The round patches on the grass and near the shrubs looked as if animals habitually rested there, but otherwise there was no hint of their presence.

" I told Katherine to lock up the dogs," said Mrs. Ivors, oddly answering her thoughts. " Oh, no, not on account of you, but because of Johnny the porter. They hate him and he is terrified of them. I am always afraid that they'll bite him."

" And that you'll be obliged to have them destroyed."

Mrs. Ivors nodded. " If they bit Johnny it would disagree with them in some way or other." She

opened a door leading off the hall. "Will you go in there for a minute, please, while I just look in at the dogs to see that they're all right?"

She was gone before Hildred could answer. The girl stopped on the threshold, and looked about the room with a sense of surprise. It seemed oddly familiar and yet it was quite unlike any room she had ever seen, with its plain bare furniture, its shabby leather-covered armchairs, a pair of rusty foils on the wall, a case of golf-clubs, so brilliantly polished that like Blake's tiger they seemed "burning bright," a dusty tennis racquet in a press, a rubber-handled croquet mallet of peculiar shape, cigarette-boxes on the table, an ash-tray or two, newly-painted golf-balls drying on the window-ledge, a tantalus and soda-water siphons on the sideboard. Where had she seen it all before? Where read of it? Where heard of it? Swift on the thought flashed the clue, and she remembered the lady in the train.

This was the room she had laughingly sketched for her husband, and her mother—yes, her mother—must be the Harry at whom they had mocked.

H. D. Ivors. Harriet Dering Ivors—Harry. The transition was absurdly easy. Hildred's face burned suddenly, but her lips trembled.

CHAPTER II

" REEDS BECOME DARTS "

HILDRED stood still for a moment, a riot of sensations linked about her preventing motion. A chasm seemed to separate her from the ordered security, the eventless calm of the past. What had she, with her studies of the culture of larger Europe, her cosmopolitan experiences, to do with this futile devotee of bat and ball? If she had led the life of the average English hockey-playing girl, she thought bitterly, she would have had more in common with her mother. She was tired and pricked with disappointment. The reality differed sharply even from her vaguest expectations.

She looked again at the dusty tennis-racquet, the gleaming golf-clubs, and the sight unchained her. She moved towards the empty fireplace and sank down into one of the shabby chairs. The leather was rubbed into holes in places, through which sprouted tufts of black horsehair; the spring of the seat was broken and sank into a canvas bag underneath, but the chair was comfortable and adapted itself consolingly to the human frame in a lounging posture, a condition of things more often to be noted in the chair of a man than of a woman. An ashtray stood on a carved stool beside it, and an instant vision of feet on the chimney-

piece seen through a haze of cigarette-smoke flashed vividly across Hildred's mind.

The door swung ajar behind her. Through it the evening air struck a little chill. Hildred would have been glad of a fire—the flame that so often warms mentally as well as physically.

From the hall outside came the introductory sound of heavy footsteps and murmuring voices, leading up to a fugue of bumps and thumps, which was chorused by the faint far barking of dogs.

"My trunks," thought the girl. "Evidently the dogs hear, and hunger for the blood of Johnny, the porter. I suppose some one is with him, and that I needn't worry about the things."

Some one was with him. In a moment a woman stalked into the room—a veritable Grenadier in petticoats, raw-boned, and weather-beaten—and demanded a shilling.

"For what?" asked Hildred.

"For Johnny the porter, miss. He's just brought up your boxes, the whole lot of them." Her tone suggested a waggon-load, rather than the three which Hildred considered quite a modest allowance.

"Is a shilling enough?" she enquired.

"'Tis what he asked, miss. Pay him no more." she took the shilling and strode out of the room, the strings of her cap fluttering absurdly as she went.

A butterfly on a block of granite had more congruity and less contrast in its placing than that ridiculous white bow on Katherine Saunders' head. It was a concession to convention demanded by herself, and she was fortunately unaware of its ludicrous effect.

Tired and depressed as she was Hildred could not help smiling when Katherine came in again, this time bearing a tea-tray with a cup and saucer, a dumpy brown tea-pot and some slices of bread and butter on a plate patterned with rose-buds.

The smile woke a flicker in Katherine's gaunt face as she removed the ash-tray and set the other on the stool beside the girl.

" There ! You'll want your tea. My duty to you, miss. I suppose you don't remember Katherine."

The tone was dry, drained of expectation or emotion, yet Hildred found herself wishing that she could rake up some lost memory from the forgotten past to which Katherine evidently belonged.

" I'm afraid I don't. I was very little when——" she stopped abruptly and flushed. " Were you my nurse long ago ? "

" No, miss. I was your grandmamma's housemaid. When she died I came to live with your mamma. This is the little plate you used to have when you came to Hurst, miss. ' Baby 'osy p'ate,' you used to call it."

The sound of baby words from those thin lips had no incongruity for Hildred. Here was some one who remembered, who perhaps had loved her in her lost childhood. A rush of tears flooded her eyes. She shut the thick fringe of her lashes upon them, but one or two clear drops forced their way through, trembling before they fell silently, and rolled, uncommented upon, down her cheeks. When she opened her eyes Katherine had poured her out a cup of tea with blobs of cream on the top.

"I didn't put in any sugar. Some people don't like it."

"I like a little," Hildred answered. "What delicious tea! I never tasted anything so good. I believe it's because 'twas made in a brown teapot. It never tastes so nice out of any other kind."

"Now eat up that bread and butter, every bit of it," commanded Katherine, "or I'll cut you a slice less next time. You should have had the silver teapot only your mamma could not remember where she had put the key of the plate-chest."

"I'd much rather have the brown one. I'm sure it was out of a brown teapot Mother Elder came." Hildred spoke simply and naturally as to an old friend, not realising any oddity in the situation.

Katherine stood beside her, looking down at her with a face devoid of any expression but a truculent friendliness.

"There you go with your whimsies just as when you were a baby child! You'd pretend to pick the roses off that plate and smell them, and give some to me and say, 'one for Kat'in.'"

"Were you fond of me then, Katherine?"

Katherine shied at emotion. "Fond? What fond? I've no time for nonsense," she said, picking up the tea-tray. "I'd better tell your mamma that Johnny has gone and that she can let out them dogs. I'll put a can of hot water in your room, for you'll be glad of a wash after your journey, miss. Will you come with me, or perhaps your mamma would like to take you up herself."

"I'll wait for her, thank you, Katherine," said

Hildred, warmed more by the first touch of humanity she had encountered than by the material comfort of the tea.

As Katherine marched away her cap-strings seemed to the girl like the vanishing flutter of a flag of truce. There was nothing really rude about her brusquerie : it merely marked the uncompromising attitude towards life of a strong personality. Hildred felt that she had found a friend : that whatever hidden chord of feeling her baby hands had touched was ready to vibrate again at her need.

A distant barking and yelping was followed by what seemed to the girl a veritable tornado of dogs, a cyclone of leaping, barking, excited creatures of which she was the centre. Yet, when the whirlwind subsided and resolved itself into its panting elements she saw that there were but four, a fox-terrier, an Irish terrier, a retriever, and a queer mongrel, black, shaggy and fierce-looking, which Mrs. Ivors had once rescued from drowning, and which had been ever since her slave and shadow.

" These are Nip, Pat and Como," she named them ; then her eyes softened a little as she gently hit the mongrel's head, " and this is Tartar, the best watch-dog in the world. I saved his life and he's never forgotten it. I believe it was Johnny the porter who tried to drown him, and that's why they all have a grudge against him. This fellow shows every white tooth in his head when he sees him, eh, don't you, you old savage ? Go over and make friends with Miss Ivors."

The big beast rose and went slowly over to Hildred, smelled her hand and sniffed at her skirt, and then

returned to his mistress. The other dogs had already responded to her advances. Indeed, Nip, the fox-terrier, had calmly curled himself up against her foot, prepared for slumber.

"You've a way with dogs, I see," said Mrs. Ivors, in her curt fashion.

"I am fond of animals."

"I distrust anyone who isn't. There must be some black spot in them. Most women spoil dogs horribly. I don't."

"What do you mean by spoiling?"

"Pampering, over-feeding, under-exercising, making puppets of them and not treating them as the rational beings they are. These fellows only get one meal a day, with an odd bone now and again. Look at their condition! You can feel their ribs. They have none of the wheezy puffiness of women's dogs. They're not the soft fat beasts that lie about on cushions. They're as keen as mustard on sport and exercise. People here borrow them for rat-hunts, but a rat-hunt is a thing I bar." She flung her hat aside, as a man would on entering a room, looked for matches and lit a cigarette, then sat down in the chair opposite Hildred. "No, I bar the taking of life," Mrs. Ivors continued, drawing in the smoke with evident enjoyment. "Life, such as it is, is given to every created thing, and no one has any right to take it wantonly."

"What about fishing?" asked Hildred.

"That's not taking it wantonly. The fish are killed to be eaten—a very different matter. 'Live and let live' is one of my mottoes. Apropos of which, that's

my favourite chair you are sitting in, and I never feel really comfortable in any other."

Hildred rose, flushed and uncomfortable.

" I am very sorry. I could not possibly know——"

" No, how could you ? " said Mrs. Ivors, with a sudden odd little chuckle. " No, don't get red and offended. ' No offence meant, none taken,' is another of my mottoes, and if you're not looking out for other people's corns you are far less likely to tread on 'em. We'll have a straight talk this evening, you and I, and then we'll start fair to-morrow."

" I should like to go to my room now and unpack, if you don't mind."

" Why should I mind ? Off with you. There is no standing on ceremony at Whitecot, as you'll soon find out."

Mrs. Ivors rose and ensconced herself in the vacated chair, while Hildred, who thought she was following her, moved towards the door. On the threshold she turned to see her fleeting vision crystallised into reality. Through a blue haze of cigarette-smoke she saw her mother reclining in the depths of the chair, her feet, if not exactly on the chimney-piece, resting on the top ledge of the grate, Tartar's black head against her knee, her whole attitude instinct with lazy content. It was a pose so contradictory to the declaration of energy made by the clubs and racquets that Hildred felt for the first time how much she had still to learn of her own sex, dubbed by the caustic Foote " a microcosm." She regretted the vague impulse which had led her to refuse Katherine's offer in order to wait for her mother, who was not even looking in her direction, but seemed

intent upon the symmetry of the smoke-rings she was blowing into the air. The aloof absorption of the pose chilled the girl afresh. She had opened her lips for an enquiry, but closed the gates of speech with a mental clang as she turned away.

There were no architectural complexities at Whitecot: the hall narrowed at the stairway into a passage which led directly into the kitchen, where a cheery clattering and clanking premised the presence of Katherine.

Hildred stood at the door and looked in. It was a pleasant concentration of comfort and cleanliness, with its cream walls and red hearthplace, its tiled floor inviting entry, its brasses and coppers winking welcome, and a canary in the sunny window trilling *fioriture* with a delicious ease which a Tetrizzini might have envied but never hoped to equal.

Katherine was chopping spinach at the table facing the door, and looked up when she saw Hildred. The girl smiled instinctively, though there was no apparent provocative or response in the hard gaunt face. It was rather an intuitive perception of a deeply-hidden tenderness, an unconscious illogical sympathy which some mysterious inexpressible radiation from Katherine evoked, than any outward realisation of attraction.

"You haven't taken off your things yet, miss," Katherine asserted gruffly, with a perfect grasp of the situation. "Come along up with me this minute and give me your keys and I'll take out some of your traps for you."

"Will that thing spoil by being left?" asked Hildred pointing to the spinach.

" That thing indeed ! It's easily seen you're not country-bred to call my beautiful spinach that thing ! "

" Is that spinach ? " The girl delicately touched one long green leaf. " I never saw it in that stage before."

" You will again, miss, before you're much older. I grow it out in the garden beyond."

" Oh, is there a garden ? I love a garden."

" Only a kitchen-garden, miss. I grow my own pot-herbs and as many vegetables as I can manage."

" Does—my mother——? "

" Bless you, no, miss. Your mamma has no head for gardening, nor no hands either. As likely as not she'd stick things root uppermost. I found her planting some primroses upside-down once, but she said it was because she wanted them to come up pink ! "

" What an extraordinary idea ? " cried the girl, who thought it the conception of a lunatic.

" Folks about here say it's true, but these ones had never a chance, for them dogs scratched 'em all up again."

" Perhaps you'll let me help you with the garden sometimes."

" Perhaps I would," returned Katherine, " but this won't unpack your boxes, and I'm a busy woman."

She stalked out of the kitchen, sniffing disapprovingly as she passed the dining-room door. Hildred felt a mischievous inclination to probe for her opinions of smoking, but knew that in the circumstances the impulse was unseemly. Her restraint was rewarded by one emphatic utterance from Katherine, addressed

apparently to the top of the stairs, for she looked neither to right nor to left as she mounted rigidly upwards.

"I don't hold with women copying men's habits. They've enough messy ways of their own without picking up theirs. This is your room, miss." She threw open a door on the landing.

It led into a narrow slip of a room which ran the length of the house and had a window at either end, one of which looked into a neat kitchen-garden, the other on the untidy, overgrown front. Its walls were papered in white with a trellis pattern of rose-buds, and the short casement-curtains were of a soft pink through which the sunshine at the western window filtered in a rosy glow. There were rosebuds on the bedspread, and a rose-chintz covered the basket-chair. It was all fresh, fragrantly symbolic of the opening rose of womanhood for whom it had been planned.

Katherine stood on the threshold and looked about her with grim pride. Hildred's quick glance scanned the room from end to end. She was surprised, charmed, and oddly touched. Here, surely, were mother-thought, mother-care, subtly, unobtrusively expressed. She drew a long breath, realising, as she saw the pretty, dainty room, that she was tired, and that here in this strange house was a haven, an oasis, a well-spring of rest. In imagination she saw one or two of her favourite pictures on the wall, some of her best-beloved books on the little bow-legged table.

Katherine's voice broke harshly upon her pleasant musings.

"I suppose it's nothing like as grand as you're

accustomed to, but it's the best we can do here for you."

" Oh, Katherine, it's lovely ! " cried the girl in warm repentance for her abstraction. " It's perfectly charming. No one could desire a prettier room."

" H'm. You took long enough to say so, miss."

" I was day-dreaming—a silly habit of mine."

" There's not much to encourage day-dreams at Whitecot," Katherine returned. " Give me your keys."

Hildred handed them over, and sat down in the chair near the west window. Over the low garden-wall she saw a green field starred with daisies and sheltered with trees just bursting into greenest film of leaf. Through the thin brown branches she caught a glimpse of dim blue hills, a gracious rolling outline towards which the sun was slowly sinking. The fruit-trees in the little garden beneath were breaking into a mist of bloom, though the rosy buds of the gnarled apple-tree beneath her had not yet unfolded their incense-filled cups to the sun. On its topmost branch a thrush fluted, answering one in the distant elms whose roulades were thinned to the elfin silver of an echo.

Hildred listened, chin on hand, while the balm of evening stole softly into her heart.

" Dinner's at half-past seven," said Katherine, rising from her knees. " I've taken out all you'll want for the present, and if you'll leave the rest I'll do them after dinner. We don't dress," she added as an afterthought.

" Don't we? Thank you very much, Katherine,

but please don't bother about the rest. I am quite used to looking after myself."

"So much the better," said Katherine gruffly.

She went to the washstand to put away Hildred's spongebag: then she fidgetted a little with the girl's silver and ivory toilet-set; then she laid a pink dressing-gown in readiness on the end of the bed, a Japanese crêpe with a design of storks in flight.

"You'd think you got this to match the room," she said, lingering unaccountably. "It's a funny pattern—all them birds."

"Yes," answered Hildred softly. "I love a pink and white bedroom. How did my mother know, I wonder?"

"Your mamma?" Katherine paused on the threshold in an attitude of arrested expectancy. "She takes no account of them things, bless her!"

"Who chose it all, then?"

"Well, miss," mumbled Katherine, as embarrassed at the desired question as if she had been taxed with some misdemeanour, "it was myself."

"You, Katherine? How—how very clever of you!"

"What clever?" sniffed Katherine. "Your mamma give me a good cheque, and said to do the best I could with it, as she knew nothing about them things. So I got one of them "Hints on House-Decoration" books, and a nice wall-paper recommended in "Room for a Young Lady," and did the rest myself."

"What? Not the papering and painting?"

"Every dash of it."

"You're wonderful, Katherine."

"Oh, no, miss, there was nothing wonderful about

it. You see, my poor father was a sailor, so I was born handy so to speak. Don't look too close at them little curtains, for the stitches aren't as small as I'd wish.”

“ But how did you guess my taste so exactly ? ”

Katherine fumbled with the door handle, and gave a contemptuous little grunt.

“ It's fair ridiculous the way trifles will stick in a person's mind.” She was half-way out of the room as she spoke.

“ You see, miss, I—I remembered the rosy plate.” She shut the door behind her with a bang.

CHAPTER III

" NO OFFENCE MEANT "

HILDRED'S mind was in a whirl as she went downstairs to dinner. She had changed her coat and skirt for a simple frock of palest grey, whose turned-back collar of lace was fastened with a knot of deep rose. A ribbon to match was twisted through her soft masses of hair. Her cheeks were lit by an inner excitement, and her throat rose round and white above the cobweb lace. She looked, as far as external appearance went, a daughter of whom any mother might well feel proud.

She had been since her arrival the pendulum of her own emotions, whose alternations made her feel a mental dizziness. A sensation of warmth stole about her heart when she thought of the crusty Katherine, and a barrier of chill aloofness loomed forbiddingly when her fancy strayed towards her mother.

The sunny kitchen and the Mother Elder teapot seemed to typify the one feeling, the cheerless sitting-room with its smoke-obscured occupant the other. She felt an unwonted nervousness as she turned the handle of the door and went in, to meet with yet another contradiction of expectancy.

A fire crackled invitingly in the grate : the curtains were drawn : the table, sparkling with glass and silver,

was lit by scarlet-shaded candles in branching candelabra. Comfort, hitherto absent from the room, now radiated an invitation to enter.

Mrs. Ivors stood on the hearthrug, her back to the fire, her hands clasped behind her. Her concession to the social code consisted of a black brocade skirt of antique cut, and a white silk shirt adorned at the neck with a cream lace tie whose ends were caught together with a gold brooch in a design of crossed golf-clubs. No pin fastened the tie to the shirt at the neck, where an angle of silk neck-band had already worked its way out from beneath it ; the patent-leather belt which incongruously connected bodice and skirt was much tighter than the waistband of the latter, which was visible all the way round.

" You look very smart," she said to Hildred, with her odd little chuckle. " Very smart and very feminine."

An obvious retort trembled upon the girl's lips, but she restrained it, and answered quietly :

" I am glad you like my frock. Cousin Antoinette liked it best of all my new ones."

" Oh, I didn't say I liked it. I only said it looked smart."

" Well, that's what one generally aims at in dress, isn't it ? "

" Is it ? I'm sure I don't know. I never trouble my head about such things. To be decently and comfortably clothed is all that is necessary to my mind."

" Mere decency isn't enough surely," Hildred began, every feminine instinct afire.

" No, it's too much for the present taste," put in Mrs. Ivors, with her dry chuckle. " Here's Katherine

with the soup, thank goodness. I'm as hungry as a hawk."

"She sat down without waiting for Hildred, as Katherine placed the silver soup-tureen on the table.

"Clear soup? You know I don't like clear soup, Katherine."

"I thought young miss might," said Katherine.

"And you want to please the visitor, eh? You ought to feel flattered, Hildred."

"We may as well try to, any way," retorted Katherine, as she whisked a soup plate in front of Hildred.

"I like any kind of soup," began the girl, "from *bouillon* to——"

"Please talk English," Mrs. Ivors interrupted.

"I don't understand any language but my own, and not all of that either."

"What part?" asked Hildred, interested at the unexpected ending of the sentence.

"The artistic jargon and cult-of-beauty piffle," she returned with a frown. "I suppose you are full of it after your three years abroad."

"I enjoyed the picture-galleries, certainly," replied Hildred quietly, though a flush stole over her face. The words jarred the ivory doors of some inner shrine.

"No need to get red because a person's tastes don't coincide with yours. How narrow people's minds would become if they only talked to those who agreed with every word they said! Argument is the spice of life."

"And contradiction the pepper."

Mrs. Ivors chuckled. "I like that. Yes, the more the hotter of course. I believe we shall get on, after

all, if you are not too soft to creep out of your shell of convention."

Katherine strode in with a dish of lamb.

"Young miss likes her room," she said, dumping it in front of her mistress.

"Does she? That's right. For myself I don't care about that sort of thing. Rooms to me are places to eat and sleep in when they belong to myself, to be fiendishly bored in when they belong to other people. Tea-parties, for instance, where you are expected to sit up and wag your tail."

Hildred laughed. It was a long time since so youthful a sound had echoed through that room. It was as if a breath of Spring had suddenly materialised.

"I cannot imagine you either begging or wagging your tail."

"No, can you? Neither I nor my dogs are puppets."

"Where are the dogs, by the way?"

"Tartar is here at my feet. The others are out adventuring."

"Like the Three Musketeers," said Hildred, her face lit by the spark of her fancy.

"Who are they?"

"Oh—people in a book," returned the girl lamely.

"A book of Dumas'——"

"Another of your foreigners, I suppose. Well, I hardly ever read books. I don't believe in 'em. They say it is a bad bird that fouls its own nest, but one of those writing fellows did so—chap named Spencer, I think. He said that book-knowledge was knowledge at second-hand. Decent people have no use for second-hand goods. I don't know what else

the fellow wrote, but if he wrote the greatest rot in the world he also wrote one of the most sensible things a man ever said. Get your knowledge, as you must get your experience, at first-hand, or not at all."

"But when one has not the opportunity——"

"You can always make the opportunity for whatever you want."

"But in the whole range of literature and science——"

"What good do literature and science do if you come across a dog with a broken leg?" asked Mrs. Ivors triumphantly. Like many people she only enjoyed an argument when it marched victoriously along one side of a subject, and that her own. When the banners fluttered in the other direction the vaunted "spice of life" lost its savour.

Dimly Hildred realised this, and determined to pursue the topic no farther.

"We must compromise," she said, with determined lightness, "or else agree to differ."

"We'll agree to differ, then," returned Mrs. Ivors. "I'll have nothing to do with compromises. No," she added, drawing her brows together, "I've done with compromise for ever."

Some memory seemed to darken her thoughts. She frowned heavily as she ate the crisp lettuce-leaves which stood near her in a cut-glass bowl. At last she looked up and met the clear young gaze of eyes so like her own that she might have been looking into a mirror.

"Your name was a compromise," she said suddenly. "I wanted to call you Helena after my mother;

your father wished to call you Mildred after his. He said we would compromise, so you were christened Hildred! You see how much I got by the compromise!" She gave a hard little laugh.

Hildred was silent. The abrupt lifting of the veil of the past was poignant to the point of speechlessness. It was as if she were suddenly poised upon a peak of judgment with an abyss yawning upon either side.

"One little letter," continued Mrs. Ivors, with a concentrated bitterness. "That is about all I have ever got by compromise."

Looking downwards from Hildred's peak she saw that mists obscured the depths, and realised in a flash that without clarity of vision there could be no just perception of reality. Whether the mists were of prejudice or ignorance none but those clear-sighted enough to penetrate them dare presume to judge.

"Well," said Mrs. Ivors. "You don't say anything?"

"I have nothing to say."

"It's a charity to find a modern girl who has sense enough to remain silent in such a case instead of rushing into speech with unconsidered drivel."

Though the words premised a vague commendation Hildred could not feel sure that approval really rang in her mother's tone: a vague vibration of disappointment seemed to sound through the rough sentences. It was a relief when Mrs. Ivors rose, and taking a handful of nuts from a green dish plunged towards her favourite chair.

"Have some, too," she said to the girl. "Bring 'em along to the fire and eat 'em here."

Hildred put a few on a plate and did as she was requested, first handing her mother the nutcrackers.

Mrs. Ivors indignantly waved them away.

"What do I want them for while my teeth are sound and strong?" she asked cracking a nut as she spoke.

"They won't remain so long if you continue to do that."

"They'll last out my time, or as long as I want 'em to." She cracked another and threw the shells into the fire.

Hildred shivered. It was a slight but irrepressible movement.

Mrs. Ivors stared fixedly at her, a nut poised midway between lap and mouth for a tense second: then it fell upon the silk skirt with a tiny dull noise.

"Good God, how like your father you are when you do that!" she whispered.

Hildred was startled. The words of reminiscence cut; there was no softening balm of memory to heal the wounds they made.

"When I do what?" she asked dully.

"Shiver like that. Heavens, that little shiver and the eyebrows almost disappearing into his hair. How you bring it all back!" Mrs. Ivors stared into the fire for a moment, her lips drawn into a thin hard line. Then she rose, shook the nutshells into the grate, got a cigarette, lit it, and put her feet upon the ledge.

"It's not your fault, child," she said at last, with an evident desire to be absolutely fair. "You can't help it. We'll change the subject. I'm not in the humour for spirit-raising to-night."

"I must say one thing before we change the subject,"

Hildred answered. She looked very fair and young in her grey gown as she leaned against the chimney-piece looking down at the sleek cropped head of her mother, haloed, unsaintly, by the cigarette-smoke's hazy blue.

"And that is?" Mrs. Ivors made a ring with elaborate care.

"That is that it cannot be such a surprise to you to find that I am like my father." Hildred's voice trembled a little; she paused for a second to steady it. "There is nothing startling in the fact that a child should resemble one or other of its parents, even parents whom it has never seen."

"Sound, if slightly inaccurate," Mrs. Ivors returned, with a careful air of detachment. "Trite, if true; but sarcasm is unbecoming to you, my dear Hildred."

"I had no intention of being sarcastic."

"No need to get red over it. Perhaps you hadn't. I'm nothing if not fair. You'll find me just to deal with, Hildred, if nothing more. I'm always honest. I say what I mean and mean what I say. The naked truth is good enough for me. I don't want trimmings or fripperies."

"The naked truth may be very indecent. There is perhaps a necessary garment of reticence."

"I don't know that I admit that."

"You won't leave her a rag, then?" Hildred felt again that tingle of amusement which her mother's former argument had provoked, despite the sensation of hurt annoyance which pricked her.

"She oughtn't to need one."

"Then it's sheer curiosity on your part," cried

Hildred with spirit. "Poor Truth! No wonder she dives to the bottom of a well!"

"You're a good sort after all!" said Mrs. Ivors, pulling the other chair near. "Sit down there and be sociable. I don't care what you do or say so long as you don't shiver disapproval at me. That I cannot stand. By the way I forgot to ask you if you smoked?"

Hildred shook her head as she sank into the chair, a well-stuffed, stiff, scarcely-used replica of its disreputable but comfortable fellow. She felt suddenly tired and lonely, with a sense of having been cut adrift in the dark.

"No? It's the one bad habit I learned from your father. He taught me first, and then when I had got to look upon it more as a necessity than a luxury he—but I said I didn't want spirit-raising to-night, didn't I?"

She leaned forward and poked the fire so vigorously that the grey ashes and embers rained through the bars, leaving but a fragment of fire which fell apart in disconsolate fading brightnesses.

With the poker still in her hand she bent towards Hildred, spilling cigarette ashes on the rubbed brocade of her skirt. "Be honest with me. That's all I ask. No pretence, no embroideries. 'No offence meant, none taken.' No looking out for slights, no huffiness, no sarcasm. 'Give and take,' is my motto, but don't do one if you're not prepared to do the other. All giving is very nearly as bad as all taking." She paused abruptly. "Now, wouldn't you like to go to bed? You're looking tired, though I don't approve of young

people being tired. I was never tired when I was young."

"Were you ever young?" asked Hildred quietly. She knew that the question savoured of impertinence, but she was filled with a numb resentment against Fate in general, and beside that cold sense as of nothing mattering she was faintly and maliciously desirous of testing Mrs. Ivor's remarkable theories.

The dull fixed red of her mother's complexion became suddenly transformed to a glow, and she looked up with eyes that were lit by the quick fire of youth itself.

Hildred had an instant vision of alert vivacious twenty peeping from behind the hard mask of two score years and ten.

"'No offence meant, none taken,' I hope," she quoted softly, with an odd flash of sympathy, inexplicable, almost undesired.

Mrs. Ivors laughed. The glow faded: the vision vanished. Sweet and Twenty was dead: slain long ago by the inexorable years, her epitaph engraved in ever-deepening lines by the hieroglyphic hand of Time. She hesitated for a moment.

"None taken," she repeated. "Off with you, Hildred. Breakfast at half-past eight. Good-night. Would you like a dog to sleep with you?" she added in hospitable after-thought.

"No, thank you," the girl answered, her indecision as regarded leave-taking crystallised to the omission of ceremonial by her mother's curt dismissal. "Good-night."

The hall-door was open: she stood there for a moment drawing in deep breaths of the cold, sweet

night air. The sky was a vast blue darkness pricked with trembling stars, a far aloof immensity. She turned away with a little shiver and mounted the stairs wearily to her own room. A thread of light gleamed from beneath the door, widening into a welcome glow as she pushed it open and entered, to find the rosy curtains drawn, a little lamp burning brightly and—oh, feminine luxury!—a warm hot-water bottle nestling between the cool slipperiness of lavender-scented linen sheets. The outer world was shut out. Here was sanctuary, warmed and scented, and sacred from the intrusion of anything save winged thoughts that would not be debarred.

CHAPTER IV

ON THE SHOCKING OF OYSTERS

HILDRED woke at dawn, lapped, forgetfully, in all the soft observances of custom. She turned drowsily upon the other side, thinking, as far as her sleepy consciousness permitted, that presently she would hear Cousin Antoinette's cuckoo-clock send forth five or six sweet hollow calls to wakefulness, that she would have another delicious hour or two of drowsiness before Mary brought up her early tea and prepared her bath, that— Her thoughts merged towards slumber again, while the outside world held its breath in the dewy silence of that one still mystic moment which comes before its awakening. The grey dawn crept in a tide of pale light farther and farther up the sky, and the sigh of awaking day breathed imperceptibly from horizon to meadow, through dew-drenched lanes and perfumed orchards, faintly stirred the curtains of Hildred's casement, and stole across her face like a spirit-breath.

She moved ; she awoke—to full consciousness this time ; to the realisation of her vanished past and unfamiliar present ; awoke with a dull ache of unrecognising wonder, of half-conscious, half-checked resentment, and lay there in her straight white bed, gazing

round the dimly-seen pretty room, as yet unimpressed by the personality of its occupant. It was a grey moment unlit by any shaft of sunlight.

Then, sudden and beautiful as when the first morning-stars sang of the first morning mysteries, a black-bird's song, "richest carol of all the singing throats," clove the silence with a golden spear of sound. It fell apart, shattered in an exquisite "mosaic of the air," bird-music that rang from leaf-filmed tree to flowering bushes heavy with dew, while an undercurrent of pipe and twitter shrilled faintly from packed hedge and eave and garden.

The rose of dawn unfolded in the sky to the lyric rapture of herald larks, and on the cottage roof the first swallows preened themselves and sang their soft love-songs that sound so like twittering bird-kisses.

Hildred's room was suffused with a rose-light, day gleaming through the drawn curtains. Her heart lifted, swelled, thrilled, to the music that owned an ecstasy unknown to the songs of fuller day. Her world had not turned topsy-turvy after all: it was only circumstances which had changed—vagrant circumstances which had no real power to bind or chill. The rose-red citadel of her imagination was left unbeleaguered: she leaned from its ramparts and caught a faint vision, tempered to mortal eyes as the wonder of stars in a pool, of the glory of God.

"The angels keep their ancient places;
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!"

she quoted softly.

Her eyes were wet, but there was no sting in those tears. They were tributary to the beautiful rather

than the sorrowful, and distilled all essence of bitterness from the girl's heart through their crystal dew.

The murmured shamefaced prayer of youth for greater tolerance and a wider understanding of her mother's puzzling personality ascended to the Throne on the winged thanksgiving of the larks, and Hildred, healthily sleepy still, turned from the glowing eastern window to the more subdued radiance of the west, and slept until Katherine aroused her with a hard cold hand upon her shoulder.

"Tea for the soft of the earth, as your mamma says, miss." Katherine's voice shattered iridescent dreams.

Hildred sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes with her knuckles as a child might, and looking very young for her twenty years with her fair hair tumbling about her shoulders.

"Oh, Katherine, is it time to get up? Why did you trouble to bring me tea if no one else takes it?"

"What trouble? I had to boil the water for your bath, and I thought you might like it."

"I love it," cried Hildred, clasping her arms round her knees. "But is there no bathroom here?"

"Miss, you're not in London. You're in the heart of the country. In fact, being at the far end of the village you might almost say we was 'county'!" Katherine gave a grim laugh at her own humour. "County we was once, and I suppose once county always county. Except them Miss Derings now. They went too near London, and when you go too near London you get to be—what do you call the word, miss?"

"Do you mean suburban, I wonder?" asked Hildred, amused.

"Yes, that's the word, suburban. So I've heard your mamma say, at least."

"Is she up yet?"

"What, up? She had her cold tub and some grape-nuts an hour ago, and she's in the dining-room now polishing them golf sticks of hers as if her life depended on it."

Katherine's voice, in speaking of Mrs. Ivors, always rang on the same note, a note of half-fierce, half-grudging affection, of resentful toleration, of perpetual judgment tempered with a regretful leniency. It seemed to Hildred as if she reserved all rights of criticism to herself, and would resent very keenly any infringement upon her copyright of condemnation.

Meanwhile with quick abrupt movements she had pulled back the curtains and arranged the girl's bath. With her, conversation never implied waste of time, for her tongue moved in concert with other physical activities.

"Johnny, the porter, brought me a string of trout this morning. Don't be long now, for they'll be spoilt if they're not eaten hot off the pan."

"Is he a friend of yours, Katherine?"

"A friend of mine? That loon? I paid him for them, of course."

Katherine stalked indignantly out of the room, while Hildred sprang from her bed with a laugh that echoed through the open doorway and penetrated down the little stairs as far as the dining-room.

Mrs. Ivors sat in the window polishing a heavy putter to the last degree of brightness. At the sound of that ripple of laughter she let it fall heedlessly. It struck

Tartar, who lay at her feet as usual, and he sprang aside with a quick yelp at the unexpected hurt. Mrs. Ivors took no notice : her senses seemed concentrated upon the one effort of listening. But silence followed upon the closing of the bedroom door, and she turned to her work with an odd little noise between a sigh and a grunt.

"Queer sound for this house," she said, and she began to whistle a popular air quite incorrectly between half-shut teeth. It was a little idiosyncrasy which she shared in common with many unmusical persons, that desire, in moments of perturbation or emotion, to hum or whistle formless, tuneless tunes, until the very teeth of the hearers are set on edge.

In this case the only auditor was Tartar, whose musical education had been presumably neglected, for the tattered air was as a siren's lure to his shaggy body, which crept back closer and closer to his mistress until he was near enough to push a moist nose into her hand and mutely beg forgiveness for a fault which she had committed.

She patted his head as she looked into his pleading eyes.

"Good old fellow ! Foolish old boy," she said in her gruffest dog-voice. "Mustn't get in the way, you know."

And Tartar curled up at her feet again with a happy snort, in glorious ignorance of the rigid principles of his mistress's great gospel of Give and Take.

She looked up later from her polishing when Hil-dred entered, comprehending with one quick glance the daintiness without the details of the girl's attire—

"frippery," as she mentally phrased it. Yet the dark blue alpaca was simplicity itself, having for sole adornment delicately-stitched lawn collar and cuffs fastened with tiny black bows. Hildred's hair was well brushed and well arranged, and shone with the soft gloss of youth: her step was light and alert; a faint tinge of the morning's glow lingered in her cheeks.

Mrs. Ivors' thick cropped hair was still wet from her bath: she had not troubled to dry it properly, and it showed at the back the hasty dividing marks of the comb. She wore a flannel shirt whose collar lacked a sufficiency of fastening in the rear, a deficiency which she had striven to supply with the aid of a crooked black pin.

"Good-morning," said Hildred, entering with a body-guard of dogs. "You look busy."

"I am busy," returned Mrs. Ivors. "I'm due for a round with the pro. at ten o'clock and the links are four miles off."

"Four miles off?" Hildred caught at the one intelligible phrase. "That's a long way. How do you get there?"

"Bicycle. Do you ride?"

"No. I never cared to learn somehow."

"H'm. Lethargic, I suppose! That puts your golfing out of the question unless you care to walk to the links."

A tincture of relief in Mrs. Ivors' tones pricked Hildred to quick retort.

"I shouldn't mind the walk in the least, but I don't think I'd care about the golf when I got there."

"With that feeling to start on you'd never make a golfer."

"I'm not very keen on games."

"Golf is not a game."

"What is it, then?"

"It's a pursuit."

"Yes," returned Hildred, "I've seen it defined in a penny paper as the pursuit of pale pills by purple people."

Mrs. Ivors sniffed: her eyes flashed quick wrath at the vulgar impertinence of such a comment on such a subject. The *amour propre* of the enthusiast was stung, but repartee failed her for once. The only available retort implied ground-shifting.

"I wonder you read such trash," was all she permitted herself to say.

"Even great minds such as mine need occasional relaxation," Hildred replied, with a little tilt of her nose. "I didn't realise that golf was such a sacred subject. I'll keep off the grass—greens you call them, don't you?—for the future."

"I never knew a game so trying to the temper," pursued Mrs. Ivors, melting at the other's concession. "When you get into a bad bunker or are stymied——"

"There! it's a new language!" cried Hildred. "I don't understand a word of what you've said, what a bunker is, or a pro. or a stymie. The only golf word I know is one which seems entirely applicable to the whole game, I beg its pardon, pursuit!—and that is—bogey!"

Mrs. Ivors gave her queer little chuckle. "Come to breakfast, you ignorant, impertinent child, and don't

talk of what your infantile mind cannot even grasp ! ” Her tone was one of high good-humour, as she carefully laid her clubs aside, jumped up and went towards the table.

In spite of open windows the smell of smoke lingered in the room mingled with a suggestion of dogs and leather, but above this distinctly unfeminine atmosphere rose the delicious aroma of frying trout.

“ What a heavenly smell ! ” cried Hildred, sniffing appreciatively. “ I am developing a country appetite already, and feel inclined to call down blessings on the head of Johnny, the porter, for having caught those trout.”

“ Did he ? I’m afraid I never trouble much about the commissariat. I leave all those things to Katherine.”

“ She was quite annoyed with me when I asked her if Johnny were a friend of hers. I thought perhaps he had brought the fish as an offering.”

“ An offering to Katherine ? No man living would be bold enough to venture on such an act. Her attitude towards men is that of the female spider, who looks upon the male sex as necessary for one object only, and devours her lovers as soon as that is accomplished.”

Hildred reddened at Mrs. Ivors’ unconsidered speech. With her cousins, Nature, in what they considered her grosser forms, had been ignored to the point of exclusion from speech if not from actual fact. They belonged heart and soul to that short-sighted generation which exists in every age, who, unable to see beyond their noses, and lacking spectacles, declare that what is invisible to their purblind eyes does not exist.

Hildred's quick flush was one of innocence not prudery, and it deepened at Mrs. Ivors' prompt comment :

" Ha ! I've shocked you. Look, Katherine, I've made my daughter blush ! "

" Better a blush on the face than a spot on the heart," retorted Katherine, as she dashed the dish with the trout on the table in front of Hildred, and flounced out of the room.

" No, you haven't shocked me," said Hildred, when she had gone. " But I'm not used to much plain speaking. At Wilmerhurst things were always wrapped up so that one was afraid of appearing indelicate——"

" If you uncovered so much as the toe of the naked truth," shot in Mrs. Ivors, jubilant. " Yes. I know. Makes you sick of wrappings and coverings. Feel you must tear them away, or, or——"

" Bust ! " suggested Hildred vulgarly.

Grey eyes met grey eyes and laughter twinkled in them.

" She's not shocked after all, Katherine," said Mrs. Ivors, as Katherine marched in with the tea and toast.

" That surprises me, ma'am," retorted Katherine, " for sometimes the things you say is enough to shock an oyster ! "

" Are oysters easily shocked, Katherine ? " asked Hildred mischievously. Her three years' sojourn in countries where the relations between mistress and maid lack the starched formality of English households made the frank intercourse with Katherine seem natural to her, and even homelike. The Misses Dering, gentle, well-bred women, would have been horrified

at Katherine's unconventional familiarity towards her mistress.

Katherine turned from the door at the girl's question, her hand on her hip. Her smooth hair boasted no butterfly incongruity this morning, and in her neat print dress and linen apron she owned a working-day trimness which was lacking in Mrs. Ivors' attire, severe though it purported to be. As her gaze met Hildred's twinkle she deliberately shut her left eye in a desperate attempt at a wink.

"If you ever hear of one that is, I'll be glad to know of it," she said, and left with the honours of war.

"One to Katherine," exclaimed Mrs. Ivors, attacking the trout with gusto. "Now what are you going to do with yourself to-day?"

Hildred felt the thread of her days hang loosely as yet. Hitherto she had not known much freedom of action; her hours had been filled, her amusements chosen, her few accomplishments fostered with a sedulous care that left but odd moments for the occupation of the rose-red citadel of dreams. She was conscious that her mother expected an answer as prompt and decisive as her question had been, and the knowledge spurred her to uncalculated response.

"I shall first unpack my boxes and put away my things."

"Your clothes?"

"Yes, and my treasures," said the girl with a little shamefaced laugh at the implied sentiment.

Mrs. Ivors' brow darkened, and a hard little laugh followed Hildred's like a mocking echo.

"Your treasures? I know the sort. ⁵ Photographs

of stiff Madonnas, dirty little bits of pottery or enamel, rags of brocade of beautiful colours." She put quotation marks in her voice about the "beautiful colours," and the words stung with a disproportionate keenness.

Hildred's ready flush fluttered flags of distress, but there was to be no hauling down of her colours.

"You needn't see them," she returned quietly. "In fact I'd rather you didn't."

The words seemed to hurt Mrs. Ivors oddly.

"You'd rather I didn't see your little rubbishes?" she repeated, with the same ring in her voice. Through the bitterness was a vibration of pain, Hildred thought, and pain of any sort touched a heart that beat tenderly under its mantle of quiet reticence.

"Only if they irritate you," she answered softly. "Besides you must remember they are not trumpery to me. I said treasures, remember, and there are no real dust-collectors among them."

Mrs. Ivors pounced on the word with avidity. "No dust-collectors! I'm glad of that, I hate dust. And I don't understand Art, or sympathise much with it either."

Evading hinted personalities Hildred tried to turn the conversation towards the general.

"One usually implies the other, doesn't it?"

"One what?" asked Mrs. Ivors gruffly, throwing the backbone of a trout to Tartar, who caught it and laid it at her feet in silent disgust.

"Sympathy implies understanding."

"Oh, don't talk rot," said Mrs. Ivors rudely. "Bad dog, I won't give you anything else. Life is too short, my dear Hildred, for these abstract discussions. Soft-

ness and sentiment aren't in my line, and I believe they're only veneered on to you, too." She looked at her watch and stretched her legs out under the table. "Time for a smoke, I declare. What luck!"

She pulled a chain which was fastened to the buckle of her belt, and by its means drew from her pocket a silver cigarette-case and match-box combined, a bag, and a small pigskin purse.

"Good idea, isn't it? My own invention entirely. I have all necessities ready to hand, from smoke to latch-key."

She held it out for the girl to admire, and as Hildred bent over it and praised the handiness of the contrivance she felt that her mother's favourite motto "No offence meant" should be blazoned in large, compelling letters at the head and foot of every conversation, so that no trick or device of apparent rudeness should cause it to be overlooked or indeed forgotten.

"This doesn't tell me, though, what you're going to do with yourself all day."

"I thought, perhaps, if you didn't mind, of tidying up the front garden a little."

"Mind? I should be delighted. The dogs have made a perfect wilderness of the place with their scratchings and bone-buryings, and I never have time to see to any of these things myself. Katherine says that the kitchen-garden gives her enough to do. You might see, by the way, if she's cut and rolled the tennis-ground. I told her to do it before you came, on the off-chance of your playing, and I hadn't time to see about it. Do you play tennis, by the way?"

"Yes. It's the one game I'm really fond of."

" Good. We'll get up some next week if the weather keeps fine. I'll send a line to the Waveneys to tell them to come over."

" That will be pleasant. Who are the Waveneys ? "

" Cousins of mine—of yours too——" Mrs. Ivors interpolated awkwardly, " who live at Standish. At least Laura Waveney is a cousin of mine. She was one of the Suffolk Derings."

" I don't know very much about any of my relations."

" No, Antoinette and Mary didn't keep up with their people when they left the country."

" I think it was the other way round," Hildred put in. " Their people seemed to forget them very easily when they lost their money and came down in the world."

" Oh, nonsense. Nothing of the sort. The Suffolk Derings—but that's neither here nor there. Laura married Sir John Waveney some years ago and they live at Standish Court, about eight miles away. Standish is the next station to this."

A sudden suspicion crept to Hildred's mind. " What sort of looking people are they ? "

" She's a nice, fresh-looking girl—well, perhaps hardly a girl now. Nothing particularly striking about her in any way. And he ? Oh, he's just the usual country squire, quite a fine-looking man. I'm not much good at description."

No, she was certainly not. Still, the colourless sentences conveyed an impression of the people who had travelled in Hildred's carriage yesterday ; an impression which the memory of their conversation strengthened. She held her peace, yet a hot wave of

indignation surged over her. How had they dared to discuss her mother in such a way in a public railway-carriage? It was monstrous! Intolerable!

Mrs. Ivors suddenly jumped up and flung away the end of her cigarette.

"I quite forgot that I'll probably have to pump up my bicycle. That is unless Katherine has done it already."

"Let me do it."

"You? You'd soil those dainty cuffs of yours."

"I've got straw gardening-cuffs upstairs."

"Straw gardening-cuffs! What next, I wonder?" Mrs. Ivors chuckled contempt. "Here, out of my way, child. I'll have it done while you're looking at it, and wondering where the valve is."

As she spoke she had the pump already fitted to the wheel and was working vigorously, pinching the tyre at intervals to see if it were hard enough, while Hildred stood looking on, feeling helplessly ignorant.

"There! I think that will do," she said at last, lifting a flushed face. "Where's my hat? I think I left it on the sideboard last night. No, it's not there now. Katherine! Katherine! Where did you put my hat?"

"On the hat-rack, of course. Where else?" asked Katherine, emerging from the kitchen for a moment with wet steaming hands. "There it is, under your nose—and as plain as it is," she added under her breath. "I suppose you expect me to be a lady's-maid as well as everything else."

"Jack of all trades and master of none," said Mrs. Ivors, slinging her heavy bag of clubs across her

shoulder, and wheeling her bicycle through the doorway.

The words, as Hildred remembered to whom she had last heard them applied, added another prickle to the nettle-sting of her resentment against the Waveneys.

Mrs. Ivors opened the gate and went out without looking back, Tartar, as usual, close at her heels. The other dogs lay in various attitudes about the doorstep, watching Hildred's movements with assumed indifference.

When, after a moment's breathing of the sweet spring air, she left them and went indoors, they turned languidly, buried nose in paw or stretched out head on gravel as was their wont, and went to sleep, with a sigh and a pretence that that was what they had desired all along.

CHAPTER V

"SUMLESS TREASURES"

IT did not take long for Hildred to unpack and arrange her possessions, which imparted to the pink and white room a note of character hitherto lacking. Her treasures, as she had girlishly called them, were few and only valuable in so far as they recalled the masterpieces of which they were but inadequate reproductions. Wistful Della Robbia babies framed in painted vellum, Botticelli's "Coronation of the Madonna" within a carven circle of gilded wood, a tiny bronze of the Dancing Faun of Pompeii, cream plaster models of the Venus of Milo and the Victory of Samothrace, an iridescent morsel of glass, blown like a foam bubble by Venetian lips into the clasp of a gold-flecked sea-horse, a Sistine Madonna in a brown Florentine frame, and a small shelf-ful of books. These, with a casket of beautiful Berlin leather-work, were the treasures which Mrs. Ivors had so bitterly derided, unseen.

Hildred kissed the Victory shamefacedly before she put it on its shelf.

"Lend me your wings sometimes, won't you?" she murmured. "I shall often envy them, you free, beautiful creature!"

After a while she went downstairs, armed, *cap à pie*, with straw cuffs and gardening-gloves.

Katherine emerged from the kitchen when she heard the step.

"You look very grand in yourself," she exclaimed. "Where are you going in them gloves?"

Hildred explained, ending with: "I am very fond of gardening."

"Gardening? What gardening? 'Tis rough boy's work, that is, not the little planting or weeding that them hands of yours is used to. Picking off dead blossoms maybe, or a bit of quiet lawn-mowing on a little plot where a daisy daren't show its head! I know the sort of gardening."

"Perhaps I'm not so helpless as you think."

"Bless you, miss, I don't think you're helpless. 'Tis too independent maybe you are after all your foreign travel. But it's easily seen you're not used to this sort of life, and all I want is for you to take it in bits at a time, and not try to swallow it whole. If you can wait till after lunch I'll help you. I can dig as good as a man." She stopped, recollected herself, and continued: "What man? I'd beat the best of 'em, I'd bet, but the most we can do is a little tidying. Them dogs would make any place into a bear-garden."

Hildred's face fell at the postponement of her plans. She wanted to be out: she felt the need for action, for occupation. She was unprepared as yet for the filling of empty hours.

"There are clumps of fern half-choked by rank grass," she demurred. "I could free them at least, and I'm sure I should find other treasures."

"Find away, then," returned Katherine, "but don't attempt any of the rough work till I'm ready to

go. Perhaps when you've picked enough blades of grass to satisfy yourself you might find a letter to write, or something of that sort to keep you quiet. Can you eat a poached egg for your lunch ? ”

“ I can but try,” answered Hildred with a twinkle. “ But won't—— ? ”

“ No, she won't. I put up some sandwiches for her, and her flask, and she'll spend the day on the links. Links ? It's a silly sort of name for just fields. But all them names what has to do with games is silly. Love and deuce in tennis, and peel and break in croquet ! How sensible people—— ! ”

She shook her head, silenced by the colossal folly of the games-playing humankind, and went back to her work.

It was a tired and rather stiff Hildred who stood in the doorway in her grey gown to greet her mother that evening ; but the girl's eyes were brightened, and her colour deepened by her wholesome day in the open air, and she waited with a sense of expectancy for some comment upon her labours.

Truly the improvement was marvellous. The grass, though still coarse and worn here and there into bare patches by the dogs, was cut close, the edges trimmed, the walks scuffed and raked into neatness. Hildred and Katherine had cleared the clogging undergrowth from the flowering bushes, and raked basketsful of leaves and twigs and rubbish from the grass. Clumps of ferns raised inquiring fronds here and there above this newer, freer world, and under the delicate green of a beech-tree shed bud-sheaths made patches of rusty gold. Closed bluebells pushed slender stems above their curving leaves, and in one corner a whit-

ened stump and spray of sawdust showed where they had cut down a half-dead bay which hid an exquisite young almond-tree, rosy as a bride against its filmy background of green.

Mrs. Ivors, flushed and excited, wheeled her bicycle up the path, commentless.

"*I am* hot," she said, resting her bicycle against the wall. "Hot and tired, but I had a glorious day, nevertheless." She took off her hat: flung it towards the hall-table, which it missed, falling upon the tiled floor with a little clatter. She mopped her forehead with her handkerchief.

"I shall feel better when I have had a drink. I suppose your expensive education hasn't taught you how to mix a whiskey and soda, has it?" she continued, pushing past Hildred and sinking into her chair. "Little whiskey, big soda—just a long drink in that big tumbler there on the sideboard. Yes, that'll do. Not so much whiskey. Pour some back. Now fill it up with soda. Ah! that's good."

She drank the mixture with a sigh of relief, and proceeded in terms which were practically unintelligible to Hildred, to expound upon her glorious day. It had had its ups and downs, it appeared. She had bungled an absurdly easy putt at the fourth hole, increasing her score by an unnecessary two, but then at the ninth she had made a marvellous drive, doing the hole in three—one less than Bogey.

"One less than Bogey! Just imagine that!" she cried, sitting upright in her triumph.

"It sounds very wonderful," Hildred answered, trying to assume an unfelt interest. She felt flat and

dispirited at the greetingless, commentless return after her day of unwonted hard work.

"Of course it's Greek to you," continued Mrs. Ivors good-humouredly. "But I wish you'd seen that drive. The pro. said that I was the first of his pupils (women, of course) who had ever driven so far. It was such a clean true shot. The ball soared, but not too high. It was like the flight of a bird. I felt I was going to do it somehow. You always know."

"Afterwards, I suppose," commented Hildred drily.

The clock on the chimneypiece chimed the half-hour.

"Heavens! it's dinner-time," cried Mrs. Ivors, "I must go and wash my hands. I won't change."

She glanced at Hildred as she spoke. The girl looked away, but it seemed to her mother as if the averted gaze pointed a contrast between her own fresh daintiness and the dusty disarray of Mrs. Ivors' flannel shirt. As a matter of fact it was to prevent such an inference that Hildred had refrained from even a cursory glance at her mother's attire; but the comparison was inevitable if unsought, and pricked Mrs. Ivors to unconsidered speech.

"It's my own house, anyhow," she said with a deliberate gruffness, "and it doesn't matter to any one what I choose to come to dinner in, even if it's my combinations!"

Hildred's heart swelled, but her spirit rose. The only way to live amicably with Mrs. Ivors was to meet frankness with frankness.

"The weather is scarcely hot enough for the latter costume," she retorted coolly, but something bright

fell on Nip's wrinkled forehead as she stooped to pat him and pull his ears.

* * * * *

“ Some people are as blind as bats ! ”

Katherine's remark was apparently addressed to the soup tureen as she set it down before her mistress.

“ Why ? What is it that I haven't seen, now ? ” asked Mrs. Ivors, restored to good-humour by the little passage-at-arms, and the assertion of her own independence.

“ You never even cast a glance at the grand things young miss and I did when you were out and away amusing yourself.”

“ What did you do ? Rolled the tennis-ground ? ”

“ What rolled ? Wait till after dinner, if it's light enough, and until to-morrow if it isn't, and cast your eye at the front that you walked through to-night as if it was the bear-garden you'd left it in the morning.”

“ My dear Katherine, I didn't leave it any more a bear-garden this morning than any other morning. Still, I'm glad to hear you've tidied it up a bit. A place always looks better for being tidy, and when the Waveneys come next week——”

“ Are they coming ? ” Katherine's tone was instinct with disapproval.

“ Only to tea,” Mrs. Ivors hastened to add. “ I met them on the links to-day, and they said they would be delighted to come over for tennis on Wednesday. You'll have to make some of your cream-cakes, Katherine. Sir John loves your cream-cakes.”

“ Yes, and makes no more of a plateful than if it was a mouthful,” snapped Katherine. “ But it's that Laura I can't abide ; no, nor never could.”

"Why, what harm has she ever done you, you old mass of prejudice?"

"Peered and pried, no more nor no less," returned Katherine, "and well you know it."

This disrespectful mention of Lady Waveney amused Hildred, whose sense of humour was young and alert; her own feelings towards that lady were not altogether tinged with sympathy, so her mood fell in with Katherine's disparagement.

"How did Lady Waveney come to offend Katherine?" she asked when they were alone.

"Silly old creature!" Mrs. Ivors laughed tolerantly. "It was long ago, before Laura was married, when I lived in Suffolk. I believe she tried to pump Katherine about me and my affairs—girl's curiosity, nothing more—but Katherine resented it, and has never either forgiven or forgotten it. She's a good hater, is Katherine."

"And a good lover, too, I should think."

"Apart from love in the sentimental sense, I should say yes."

"You should," returned Hildred calmly. "What would you do without her, I wonder?"

"Without Katherine?" Mrs. Ivors looked positively startled for an instant. "I'd be perfectly lost. But there's no fear of her leaving me, thank Heaven!"

"I don't suppose there is."

"It's not playing the game to alarm me like this without a cause. It's so like——" Mrs. Ivors stopped abruptly. "I've made an engagement for you for to-morrow," she continued, after a pause.

"Yes?"

" Tea with the Miss Lebartes."

" Who are the Miss Lebartes ? "

" An aunt and niece who live in the village. The aunt was sister of our late vicar, and used to keep house for him, and she thinks her mission in life is to keep an eye on parochial matters in general, and in particular to put down, with a high hand, anything that savours of Ritualism. She looks on any innovation of the new vicar's in that light."

" Pleasant for the new vicar."

" He's not so very new. He's got used to it now after three years of it. Personally, I can't see what it matters whether a man turns to the east or to the west, or wears blue vestments or green so long as he's an honest, straightforward fellow, and lives up to his prayers as best he can. But a difference of opinion in the Church seems to upset the religious digestion of a good many so-called Christians. To my mind it would be more really religious if they attended to the prayers they were supposed to be saying instead of peeping through their fingers to see whether the parson was turning to the right or to the left. More pretence! More frippery! Bah! I've no patience with it."

Hildred's religious beliefs, like her innate worship of the beautiful, were hidden away within the ivory shrine of her inmost heart, and any alien touch upon them jarred. She saw the sound common-sense of what her mother was saying, but she was too young, too much enwrapped in her veil of reticence and sensitiveness to suffer any intrusion upon so intimately personal and sacred an emotion. She glanced to a side-issue.

" What sort of person is the younger Miss Lebarte ? "

"Oh, Arabella—Arab, every one calls her—is a bright, capable sort of girl."

"A girl?" Hildred's eyes brightened, foreseeing possible companionship.

"Well, scarcely what *you* would call a girl, I suppose. Arab must be anything from thirty to thirty-five. She's great at competitions."

"Golf competitions?"

"No, no, nothing of the sort. Competitions in newspapers, magazines, that sort of thing. She's no use at games. She has a good serve at tennis, that's all, but plays a footling game of croquet. Golf, of course, she can't touch."

It was easy for Hildred to perceive that at the moment golf reigned king, no, emperor, over any and every other form of game, amusement, pursuit—what you will.

"She and I ought to get on in that case. I have a tolerable service and loathe croquet."

"My form is volleying," said Mrs. Ivors complacently. "You might ask them both to come here on Wednesday if you remember it."

"Why? Aren't you coming to the tea-party tomorrow?"

"Me? Go to a hen bun-worry if I can possibly avoid it? No, thanks. I'm going to play in a foursome with the Waveney's and Dr. Lisle."

Hildred's heart sank. The idea of an afternoon spent with the lady of eagle eye for clerical misdemeanours and the damsel of competition-winning proclivities appealed to her less than a day of the garden and a semi-solitude tempered by Katherine.

"They asked us both, of course," continued Mrs.

Ivors, sitting on the ledge of the open window, and pulling out her cigarette-case. "But fortunately, I had already made the other engagement. It's not often Dr. Lisle is able to get away. We ought to have a good match. There's a box of balls on it, best Spaldings. Not to be sneezed at, I can tell you, in these days of high prices." She lit a cigarette and puffed at it. Her outline looked slim and spare, silhouetted against the blue dusk of the night. She drummed her heels against the panelling as a boy might, perched there upon the sill. No one coming into the unlit room would have taken her to be the mother of the girl who sat near her with clasped hands lying in her lap—a grey shadow among the deeper shadows of the Spring night.

"It's a pity Arab doesn't play golf. It might improve her chances."

"What chances?"

"Arab, like her namesakes," continued Mrs. Ivors, with apparent irrelevance, "is always looking across a sandy desert. On the horizon is the figure of a man—Dr. Lisle—but he comes no nearer. He is always a silhouette upon the fringe of the desert. Do you understand?"

The dry words called up an instant vision of the East before the girl's eyes. An unconsidered query rose to her lips and broke from them impulsively. "Have you been in Egypt?"

"Yes." The curt monosyllable fell cold as a stone with a chill finality which checked the spring of further question or comment.

Hildred shrank back a little, reddening in the darkness. Unawares she had touched a wound.

CHAPTER VI

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

MISS ARABELLA LEBARTE'S *métier* had been determined almost at the outset of her competition career by her winning of the prize of a dozen pairs of gloves for the best definition of an old bachelor. With smart flippancy she described that anomaly of humanity as "the crooked stick that is left in the wood." Since then she had never looked back. If success had not always crowned her, if her best efforts had not won her either a house in the country or a pound a week for life, still her epigram on the New Woman—"A fresh darn on the original blue-stockings"—appropriately provided her with a shoe outfit, and her selection of Easter Egg as the best name for a race-horse (pedigree given) with a new Spring hat, while odd sums for successful limericks, and an occasional guinea for the correct results of Literary Guessing Competitions pleasantly supplemented her pocket-money.

An accurate list of words ending in "ism" in answer to rather misleading questions had just secured her a fountain-pen, which she was utilising in filling in a similar series with answers ending in "ic" when Hil-dred was ushered into the cool little drawing-room of Miss Lebar-te's house.

The neat precision and orderly trimness of the place, from garden gate to inner sanctum, was grateful to the girl after the untidiness of the Whitecot sitting-room. Into its drawing-room, a place of drawn blinds and stiff new-smelling furniture, unfriendly of aspect, with unused, almost menacing air, she had peeped this morning, shutting the door hastily upon its aloof ugliness. That Katherine waged constant war upon slovenliness she well knew, but even she had long ceased to try to conquer the atmosphere of dogs, cigarette-ash, and general disarray which was as the breath of heaven to Mrs. Ivors' nostrils.

"Nothing pretty here, thank God!" she used often to say, looking round complacently as she put her feet on the chimney-ledge.

There was a sufficiency of prettiness—perhaps a superabundance of it—in the drawing-room at Hillside, which was the name of Miss Leberte's house, so-called with the usual sweet reasonableness to be observed in house-nomenclature, because it stood farther away from the hills than any other house in the village.

The bureau at which Arabella sat was over-elaborately ornamented; each chair had its blatantly-spotless frilly head-rest, and there were plants enough, in art pots, to have stocked a small-sized green-house. Still the effect was of dainty freshness, even if one had to be careful in threading one's way through the innumerable crowd of little tables, chairs and ottomans.

Arabella jumped up as Hildred entered. She was tall and well-proportioned, dark of hair and bright of eye. As she held Hildred's hand and murmured words of conventional greeting, it seemed to the girl

that to judge from the quickness of her darting glances her mind must be sharp and polished as a needle. Her conversation, however, but seldom indicated this: Arabella Leberte was wittier with her pen than with her tongue. She could write an epigram where speech would falter into muteness.

"Sit here in this chair near the window," she said, "that is, if you're not afraid of draughts. You must be tired after your walk from Whitecot. The weather has turned surprisingly warm."

"I did not mind the walk in the least, thanks," Hildred answered, sitting down in the indicated chair. "I am rather fond of walking, and it's only about a mile here, if as much."

"Your mother always says it is such a distance, but then people who are used to cycling think a half-mile walk a nuisance. Yet she thinks nothing of tramping miles over the links. Aren't we strange anomalies?"

"We are," agreed Hildred. "The older one grows the more one realises the queerness of human beings."

"The queerness of ourselves, I think," said Arab, shrewdly. "But you're not old enough to have found that out. We girls take a long time before we make that discovery."

"I don't know," Hildred pondered in an odd little grave way characteristic of her. "I think the more we see of life the more we realise how ordinary we are. We begin by thinking that we are abnormal beings, unusually subtle and difficult to understand, but as we gain experience we discover that we are very ordinary and no more brilliant or interesting than anybody else."

Not half so much so, probably, but I don't think I've quite reached that stage yet."

Arab darted one of her needle-like glances at the girl.

"Now that's just the sort of thing Dr. Lisle would say. Have you met Dr. Lisle?"

"Not yet. I've only been here two days."

"Where have you been all the rest of the time?"

"Abroad, finishing my education," replied Hildred curtly. She shrank from being questioned, unconscious of how much or how little these people knew of the real circumstances of her life.

"Yes. I remember Mrs. Ivors said yesterday that you had gone to Germany the year she came to live here. What did you think of the Germans? Fat, beery, greedy creatures, aren't they?"

Hildred smiled, relieved at the change of topic. "Not all of them. And you've asked me a very large question. I went to Germany rather full of prejudices, but I found that I had to leave most of them behind me."

"Had you really? And the Italians now? Aren't they greasy, treacherous creatures, and don't they fry all their food in oil?"

Hildred laughed outright. "They certainly fry things in oil, but——"

"How horrid! I should hate to have everything taste oily!"

"But it doesn't——"

"Oh, it must," said Arab, with the calm superiority of the untravelled. "Things fried in oil must taste of oil."

"What about the French?" Hildred enquired.

"Horrid, finicky little mannikins! I don't know anything about them."

"It's good of you to admit it," said Hildred drily. "Have you ever been abroad?"

"Never, except once, a day-trip from Folkestone to Boulogne. I never want to go again."

"Why?" queried Hildred softly.

"I didn't enjoy it a bit. I couldn't make out one word the people said, and they couldn't understand my French. No, England is good enough for me."

"That is a typically English point of view," said Hildred, feeling almost overwhelmingly cosmopolitan. "You and my mother should have much in common."

"Yes, we agree thoroughly on that point," returned Arab, with an emphasis which inferred non-agreement on other subjects. "By the way, in the interest of our conversation—and you can't imagine how nice it is for me to have another girl to talk to—I forgot to make my aunt's apologies to you. She was obliged to go to the vicarage on business, something about the design of the new church book-markers. She hoped to be back quite soon, but has probably been delayed."

Hildred's quick imagination pictured the scene: the harrying of the vicar over the too Ritualistic tendency in the design of the book-markers, the protest and explanation thereof leading to further argument, in the heat of which Miss Leberte, senior, had probably forgotten all about her expected guest.

"I hope your aunt will not hurry back on my account," she said politely, "that is, unless I am taking

up too much of your time. My mother tells me you are very clever."

Arab blushed with pleasure. "Oh, that's only Mrs. Ivors' joke. Sometimes she has rather a sardonic sense of humour. Sardonic——" She paused on the word. "Excuse me for a moment. Sardonic. I must see if that fits anywhere in my list."

She darted across the room to the bureau, avoiding the tables and chairs with the skill of long practice, and eagerly scanned the list of questions, the answer to each of which should be a word ending in "ic." She came back to her seat near Hildred, slip in hand, shaking her head at the momentary disappointment.

"I am sure you could help me," she said. "You must know more words ending in 'ic' than I do."

"I'm convinced I don't," cried Hildred. "I can't think of a single one this minute except stick, and you don't want a k, do you?"

Arab's dark brows almost met in a frown of concentration.

"No, we mustn't have a k. Now what can this possibly be—'Circular yet devastating'?" She repeated the words slowly, as if to lure the answer from the phrase. "Circular yet devastating! A saw is all I can think of, which is absurd, and that 'yet' puzzles me."

"It's probably meant to," said Hildred, gazing at a pot of lily-of-the-valley which stood on a table near her from which every waft passing through the open window brought gusts of bewildering fragrance. She stooped closer to breathe in its sweetness. "It's an intoxicat-

ingly beautiful scent," she said. "Perhaps it will inspire me."

She leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes. "Circular yet devastating—Faint yet pursuing," she murmured. "Ah, I have it! Would cyclonic do?"

"Cyclonic?" With a colourable imitation of the adjective Arab fled for the dictionary, returning with triumphant mien. "Cyclone, a circular or rotatory storm. Cyclonic, that must be it. Miss Ivors, I am awfully obliged. I can't tell you how grateful I am." Her whole air sparkled with delight.

"What is the prize?"

"A hair-comb from the Parisian Diamond Company. Won't it be lovely for evening wear if I get it?"

"Indeed it will," cried Hildred, fired with the contagion of the other's enthusiasm. "Let me see the list. How many words have you got? Perhaps I could help a little more. It's quite exciting."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to enter yourself?" asked Arab, drawing back a little.

"Absolutely certain. I never won anything in my life except the booby prize at a golf-croquet tournament at ho—at Wilmerhurst once."

Swift as the correction of the slip had been, Arab noticed it, but it caused no wonder in her mind, for she concluded that Wilmerhurst was where Mrs. Ivors had lived before she came to Burnaby. She cherished a friendly enmity for Hildred's mother, a feeling often to be observed among the limited members of a small social community, but the girl herself had lit in her a spark of interest which might possibly develop into

a light of warm friendship. With a large flight of imagination she annihilated the fifteen years' difference in their ages, ignored the diversity between the outlook of twenty and that of thirty-five, and was ready to admit and admire the wider view of one who had travelled in a large circle, in comparison with herself, who had scarcely looked over the edges of her own groove.

"Here is one which has puzzled me more than any," she said, tapping her list suggestively. "I wonder if you can make head or tail of it. "Derived from dog, may bite as well as bark."

"Derived from dog, may bite as well as bark," Hildred repeated. "My mind is a perfect blank. I really am very stupid about such things. Is there no one else whom you could ask? Dr. Lisle, for instance. Has he any talent in that direction?" The girl thought vaguely that perhaps an unexpected bond might lurk in the pages of a mutual dictionary.

Arab flushed a slow red. "Oh, no. I couldn't think of bothering Dr. Lisle. Besides he rather laughs at my competitions, though he knows they are all I have to keep my mind alive in this dull hole." She spoke with sudden vehemence which almost startled Hildred.

"There are different sorts of laughter," the girl rejoined softly. "The laughter that mocks, the laughter that hurts and the laughter that understands. Probably his is the latter kind, the kind that no one minds."

Arab's hard, bright face softened. "Now, how did you think of that?" she asked. "You are a clever

little thing to hit on the explanation that would please me most, and you must be a great deal older than you look to be so wise."

"I am twenty."

"Yes, so your mother told us. Sweet and twenty," added Arab on an unexpected impulse, leaning forward and giving her a little peck on the cheek, which so embarrassed the donor that she hastily returned to her list with a little cough, as if of warning to take no notice of the incident.

Hildred was amused, and at the same time a trifle touched. The spectacle of a spirit peering out of the limitations of its body was one to rouse sympathy if not compassion. Still, the groove may lead to Heaven as well as the wider road, and the rut merge into the great Highway. Who can tell? The outlook from a peak may breed the pride of the eye, while the valley-dweller has only to raise his to see the stars.

"Derived from dog——" Arab murmured. "Ah, here's auntie, at last!"

She jumped up and ran to greet her aunt. All her movements were quick and brisk, and accorded with her alert glances. The elder Miss Leberte was large and imposing, with a fuller eye and a more commanding nose than her niece could boast, and she sailed to greet Hildred upon a wave of welcome.

"I hope Arab has made my apologies, my dear Miss Ivors," she said benignly. "I could not help my absence, for there was a little matter which positively had to be seen to before next Sunday, and which would brook no delay."

"I quite understood."

“ And you two girls made friends meanwhile. It is such a boon for Arab to have some one to talk to who is nearer her age than I am, and I hope that you will come to see her very often.”

Hildred murmured thanks. Then she recollected her mother's message and delivered it. Arab's face brightened, but fell, as Miss Lebarte replied :

“ Wednesday ? Many thanks, my dear, but it is my Mothers' Meeting day, and I could not possibly go. Mrs. Ivors must have forgotten—but there, she does not take much interest in parochial matters. Her tastes lie in a different direction. However, I am sure it will give Arab much pleasure to accept your kind invitation.”

“ Oh, thank you, Auntie ! ” cried Arab in such heart-felt tones that Hildred wondered if it were possible that auntly permission had to be granted for every outing to a person who had surely reached years of discretion long ago.

She could not know that Miss Lebarte considered that no spinster (always excepting herself) ever reached years of discretion. To the members of the Honourable Estate alone (with the exception of those mothers whom she weekly exhorted and instructed) was freedom of action or initiative permitted, and they, she reflected consolingly, possessed the wholesome checking influences of husbands.

The bringing in of tea created a diversion, during which Miss Lebarte questioned Hildred upon her doings since her coming to Whitecot. When she heard of her gardening experiences she benignantly desired to help.

"Only for those dogs you could have a beautiful herbaceous border," she exclaimed. "But of course it is too late to start one now in any case. However, in the autumn——"

"I should like to experiment on some summer flowers first," said Hildred, with her ready flush, a blossom-like rosiness that came and went across the fine whiteness of her skin with a distinctly attractive effect.

"Auntie is a great gardener. She does all the planning and arranging, and every one admires our garden."

"And what do you do?"

"Oh, just the planting, and tidying, and weeding."

"A fair division of labour for age and youth," said Miss Leberte with her commanding smile. With the generosity of the true garden-lover she pressed plants and cuttings on Hildred, and the girl went home with hospitable invitations ringing in her ears and a great basketful of green summer promises in her arms.

CHAPTER VII

MAY DEW

“ **D**ON'T forget that to-morrow is May Day, and get up in proper time, and go out and wash your face in the dew,” said Katherine late that night.

“ What do you call proper time, three, four, five or six ? ” asked Hildred.

“ Go on with you ! ” said Katherine, her grim face relaxing into a smile. “ Be off before the good has been sucked out of it by the sun, for the first dew of the mother of months will do your skin more good than all the nostrums in the world.”

“ Why, Katherine, have you been reading Chaucer ? ‘ May, that mother is of monethes glad ’—” the girl quoted softly.

“ What Chaucer ? Never heard of him, except an old shepherd at home that used to beat his wife every Saturday night as regular as the calendar. You could set your watch by her screams.”

“ Katherine ! ”

“ Well, that's all the Chaucer I ever knew, and she used to scream before ever he laid a finger on her, like a sensible woman. My old grandame used to say that May was the mother of months and May dew the magic which made roses blossom on the young maids' cheeks.”

"That's as poetical as Chaucer."

"What poetical! Poetry won't butter parsnips."

"I don't want it to."

"No, you're full of whimsies. That's why I reminded you about the May dew. Where's your mamma?"

"Asleep in her chair in the dining-room. She seems tired. She lost her match, but they played another round and won, and they stayed on playing until just dinner-time."

"Tired, is she? That's not like her. I hope she's not ailing," cried Katherine, all gruff anxiety. "I'll go and wake her up, and make her a hot drink and send her to her comfortable bed. Off with you, and if you're not out by six I'll bring you up a cup of tea."

"Oh, don't bother about it," said Hildred, mounting upwards, hearing as she went a sharp remonstrance from her mother for Katherine's arousal of her.

She and Katherine had dug a bed for the little plants which Miss Leberte had given her, fencing it round carefully with *chevaux de frise* of sticks and wire to prevent canine depredation. Katherine had also bought her some mignonette and poppy-seed in the village, and she fell asleep dreaming of the riot of sweetness and colour which as yet lay hidden in the tiny dry globules.

The choir of birds awoke her early to the magic symphony of May, thrush and blackbird vieing in golden solo, mellow note after note falling round and lyric through the hushed air, a dew of sound, as evanescent as beautiful.

The house was still in slumber. She rose softly, dressed, and stole out into the sweet morning fragrance.

A gap in the hedge behind the shrubbery led into the field near the house. Hildred slipped through it into a world of dew, whose crystal drops beaded heavily each drooping blade of grass, and filmed gossamer-thread and cobweb to a fairy silver. It was a green May emerging from an early-springing April, a May pausing on the threshold of her first morning in dryad wonder. Overhead the beech-trees spread delicate black branches thick with exquisite young leaves, as light in frondage as giant maidenhair ferns: through their thin translucence a sky of half-veiled blue peeped tenderly.

Hildred went out into the grass, stooped and gathered the dew in rosy palms, bathing her face again and again in its fresh moisture. Never before had she savoured a sensation so exquisite, so fresh, so pure. She felt newly-created—a virgin Eve in the world's first morning. She moved through the heavy grass in ecstasy, not knowing whither she went, drawn towards the open by spirals of song from mounting larks. At her feet the daisies opened eyes of wonder, and the buttercups lifted burnished golden chalices to the sun, mounting, like the larks, to his appointed zenith; while in the hedges frail blue speedwells reflected the deepening colour of the sky.

Another gap lured her unwitting feet. She passed through beneath the elms, whose shed blossom-discs carpeted ground and bank with palest green, while overhead their branches were as yet merely filmed with tiny leaves, to find that the country dipped to a sudden valley beneath her:—a wooded valley of oak and fir and larch; a wonderland of greens of every hue from

the bluish depths of the fir through the young yellow of the oak to the tasselled pride of the larch.

The undergrowth at the opposite side was a tangle of brambles, whose light new trails rose triumphing above the darker growths of last year; the near side was spread with the pale brown croziers which the ferns lifted above the rust of their dead leaves, and emerald patches of wood-anemones; while on a slope towards a trickling stream, a faint hyacinth mist presaged bluebells.

Hildred ran towards them, her spirit dancing, her heart singing: the youth of the year calling to the youth in her found an echo invincible. The bubbling, brown stream danced over sun-flecked stones, rippling and laughing at the spring secrets it knew. Like the trees that listen to immemorial lovers all Nature knows but does not tell, save to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see withal.

The bluebells were but a promise yet; a full bell emerging here and there from the clustered buds, drew the threads of the amethyst-grey veil that soon would turn to a magical mist of blue.

Hildred knelt, in spirit as well as body. The petty annoyances and disappointments of daily life were forgotten, obliterated, swept aside like the cobwebs whose delicate web her careless feet had passed through in their quest of May dew. The hours were winged. Time, as divided into prosaic minutes, was not. It was a moment of spiritual growth, lit by a far radiance of the eternal. It was a thread of sudden gold woven into the fabric of her life, unsought, its import unnoted in its passing, but never to be set aside or forgotten.

The sound of a footstep on the upper path trampled among her dreams and put them to flight. She rose to the reluctant admission of others into this magic morning world. A whistling accompaniment to the heavy footfalls premised a ploughboy or a shepherd: some country yokel whose dreams rose no higher than bread and cheese and kisses.

Prose brushed aside the gossamer wings of fancy, and, taking Hildred by the hand, led her back to Whitecot through the dew-field where now pastured an intrusive flock of sheep and lambs, who had long since shaken the dew-drops' stars of morning from their grassy heaven.

As Hildred slipped in through the gap she came face to face with the little almond-tree, whose fortress she and Katherine had so successfully assailed and demolished.

"You are free, fairy princess among trees," she murmured. "Oh, you exquisite thing, you are as rosy as the sunrise on the snow mountains!"

She stood rapt for another magic moment, so absorbed that she neither heard the opening of the wicket nor the sound of approaching footsteps until a voice spoke behind her.

"If every common bush is afire with God, what then is this?" it asked softly.

The tone and words so fitted with her mood that it was scarcely with surprise that she turned to find a man at her elbow, a little brown, wiry man with eyes of that surprising forget-me-not blue which is so rarely seen outside the fields of childhood.

"But only he who sees takes off his shoes," she finished the quotation gravely.

"Apropos of which," said the little man, glancing downwards with a change of manner, "your own shoes are as wet as if you had been walking through a river. You ought to go in and change them at once. I am a doctor—Dr. Lisle—so I speak with authority."

Hildred laughed: she felt an instant sympathy with this little man of Protean changes of mood, none of which, she felt with sudden intuition, would ever jar or wound.

"The wet hasn't penetrated yet, though you brought me back to earth with a bump! I've been to church in a wood where the bluebells rang the chimes."

"You've been washing your face in the May dew."

"How do you know?"

"By the result, of course. But, pardon my curiosity, are you an expert exponent of the mango trick?"

"The mango trick?" Hildred looked puzzled.

He waved his hand towards the almond-tree. "I have come here at all times and all seasons within the last three years, and never have I beheld that slip of enchantment before. Did you evolve it out of the bare earth? You couldn't have planted it there in full blossom."

Hildred smiled again, her varying flush fleeting like cloud-shadows across her cheeks. "It was always there," she answered. "But it was hidden behind a bay-tree which was more than half dead. Katherine and I cut it down and released the prisoner."

"It was always there, but it took you to show it to us," he repeated softly. "A very pretty morning's work, upon my word, very pretty. Now go in and

change your shoes and tell your mother—for I presume you are Miss Ivors—that Dr. Lisle would like to see her for a moment.”

“ If she’s visible.”

“ She’s sure to be visible. Mrs. Ivors is one of the early birds.”

“ But what o’clock is it ? ” asked Hildred.

“ After eight.”

“ And I’ve been out since five ! ”

“ You must be hungry,” remarked Dr. Lisle, with a dry smile. “ May dew and bluebell music make somewhat unsubstantial fare.”

“ Hallo, that you ? I heard voices and wondered who it could be at this unearthly hour ! ” Mrs. Ivors emerged from the house with a golf-club under her arm, and sauntered towards them. “ Now, don’t say you’ve come to tell me that foursome’s off, doctor.”

“ I’m afraid I have. I’ve got to go to Mudford by the 9.20, for a consultation.”

Mrs. Ivors’ face fell. “ Well, you needn’t look so radiant over it. I wouldn’t have let you in for such a licking as we got yesterday. Something tells me I’m in form to-day.”

“ All good luck go with you, then. You’ll easily get another man.”

“ One would think you liked going to Mudford ; dirty little hole.”

“ It means work, my good madam,” answered the doctor, with a light in his blue eyes, “ and though you won’t agree with me, work is a hundred times better than play.”

“ That’s just one of your platitudes,” snapped Mrs.

Ivors. "But where did you two pick each other up?"

"I saw Miss Ivors dryad-worshipping. She was adoring the nymph of the almond-tree, so I went and joined her."

"The nymph of the almond-tree? What rot you talk! Oh, that wretched little bush? I see. The cult of the beautiful in full swing." Her lip curled disagreeably. She turned to the house, shattering the last fragments of the morning's magic.

Then she swung back again, her face a little clearer. "Won't you breakfast with us, doctor? Do. I hear and smell bacon frying in the kitchen. Hildred, tell Katherine that Dr. Lisle will be here for breakfast, and don't be long."

"I must change my shoes and skirt," said Hildred, "but please don't wait for me."

"Why? What have you been doing?"

"Something silly, as usual," blushed Hildred. "Scold Katherine if you like. It was she who put me up to it."

She disappeared into the house, her pulses beating with a pleasurable sense of excitement, and entered the dining-room, fresh and fair in a pale pink cotton frock just as Mrs. Ivors began to pour out the tea.

"I hear that you are not a golfer, Miss Ivors," said Dr. Lisle. "We must banish golf from our conversation."

"Please don't on my account."

"Wouldn't you think it rather rude if Mrs. Ivors and I began to talk Dutch, knowing that you didn't understand a word of the language?"

"It's an apt analogy," laughed Hildred. "But what shall we substitute, the weather or the country? Both are exquisite at present."

"The country for choice. The beeches are at their loveliest now."

"Yes, but they thicken and darken in a few days," said Mrs. Ivors, "and lose their bloom even quicker than a young girl."

Hildred glanced at her mother, wondering if a snub were intended, but Mrs. Ivors' face was impassive.

"What a pity that young things must grow up!" Hildred exclaimed. "I passed through a field of sheep and lambs this morning, and the lambs were so pretty with the light shining pinkly through their ears, while the sheep looked so ugly with their weight of wool and their bare faces looking exactly as if they had screwed all their hair tightly back."

Dr. Lisle laughed. "Yes, young things are poignantly pretty," he said.

"Not young birds," put in Mrs. Ivor quickly. "Most young birds are perfectly hideous. Young swallows are exactly like two woodlice joined together, and their ugly fluff—ugh!"

"I think I like young things because they are little and helpless," said Hildred softly.

"I don't," answered Mrs. Ivors shortly. "But then I fear I haven't got what you call the maternal instinct."

It was an odd speech for a mother to make before her only child. Dr. Lisle looked from Mrs. Ivors, hard, spare, and muscular, to Hildred's soft curves

and pliant lines, and thought that the maid suggested more of the derided instinct than the matron. The situation piqued and puzzled him, but he was used to the facing of problems in his professional life, which had taught him many things—noticeably the useful lesson of knowing when to interfere and when to stand aside.

“There’s a great deal too much sentimentality in the world,” said Mrs. Ivors, helping herself to toast, and crunching it determinedly. “I bar sentiment, I must say.”

“Who sat up all night with a sick dog?” asked Dr. Lisle of no one in particular.

“Pish! My dear man, that was humanity, not sentiment. You should choose your words better.” She smiled until her lips drew into a thin line. “In my early days I had much instruction upon the nice discrimination of words, the selection, the meaning, the shades of meaning, the beauty of the ring of the right word in prose or poetry!”

Hildred had again the hurt sensation of quotation marks: she knew too well whose phrases were being hurled at her like javelins.

“Poetry I bar at all costs! Oh, Lord, what a relief it was to drop into slang again!” She leaned back in her chair and laughed, but it was a laughter that sounded like the clash of steel, very different from the bubbling spring of mirth which had concentrated her senses into the one tense effort of hearing only yesterday.

There was a pause—a weighted, sharp-edged pause. Then Hildred, with a voice which trembled a little

despite a valiant effort at self-control, turned to Dr. Lisle, and said :

"Apropos of words, do you know any one ending in 'ic' which is derived from dog?"

It was rather a surprising question in the circumstances, but Dr. Lisle, turning on the girl blue eyes full of admiration for her adroitness, rose to the occasion and answered almost without thought :

"Cynic. Yes, from the Greek, *κύων*, *κυνός*, a dog."

"Ah, that must be it," cried Hildred, in quick relief. "I must tell Miss Arabella Leberte. She will be so pleased."

"One of Miss Arab's competitions." Dr. Lisle laughed softly. "Well, they give her an interest, a mental interest I mean, in a place where there are very few to be had."

Hildred smiled in response : it was another bond. He understood, and before she had even seen him she had known he would.

"Rubbish," said Mrs. Ivors. "She has her garden and her aunt and the parish and the Standish Tennis Club in summer. I call that plenty of interest for a single woman."

"Come now, Mrs. Ivors, you know you like your paper as well as any one, and can appreciate a good leading article with the best."

"The sporting news is all that interests me," answered Mrs. Ivors perversely. "That is when it doesn't involve killing things unnecessarily. I don't want to be inhospitable, but you'll miss your train if you don't go now, my good man."

Dr. Lisle rose. Mrs. Ivors buttonholed him as one man would another.

"Don't forget, consultation or no consultation, that you've promised to come here for tennis on Wednesday."

"I won't forget. No fear of that."

"And would you tell Miss Arab about cynic yourself?" Hildred suggested, as he held her hand for a moment. "That is, if it isn't out of your way. I'm rather hazy about the lie of the land as yet."

"I'll call at Hillside on my way back to-night," he promised. "Meanwhile I hope you won't forget how to do the mango trick."

Hildred laughed. She reminded Dr. Lisle of the almond-tree as she stood there, a young blossom of womanhood in her pink gown.

"What does he mean?" asked Mrs. Ivors, when he had gone.

"It was only a joke," Hildred explained flatly. "He pretended to think that I put the almond-tree there myself. That was all."

"Nonsense enough," exclaimed Mrs. Ivors, but her tone had lost its edge.

She got up to collect her golf-clubs, and in passing pinched Hildred's cheek, leaving her agasp at this caress in the rough.

"What a soft little pussy-thing it is!" she said, as she turned, whistling tunelessly, to get her bicycle.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TENNIS PARTY

BY the time that Wednesday broke cloudlessly into a day of perfect summer, still freshly tinged with Spring, Hildred had settled into the Whitecot routine, adapted her lines to its lines, her curves to its irregularities. It seemed to her somewhat strange that she should have fitted so easily and so quickly into what was in a sense such an alien environment, but the three years of travel in different countries had rendered her more adaptable to her surroundings than if she had lived the ordinary life of an ordinary English girl. Not that such apparent plasticity implied weakness of character ; the chameleon, though he may vary his hue according to circumstances, still remains a chameleon.

Katherine's crusty warmth cheered and amused her, while she felt instinctively that Mrs. Ivors' sudden onslaughts of hostility were directed more towards her father in her than towards her own personality. She felt outbursts of sympathy for and with the absent, even while her spirits rose in response to some unexpected tinge of approval from the present parent. She did not try to analyse the situation ; with the healthy optimism of youth she accepted the daily round as it

came, and gazed into no imaginative crystal for future revelation.

After breakfast she paused at the drawing-room door.

"I was thinking of bringing in some flowers and branches to give this place a more lived-in look, if I may," she said tentatively.

"Certainly not," declared Mrs. Ivors. "I see no sense in making any place look like a Jack-in-the-green. The whole room is a concession to Katherine and conventionality. She insisted that I should have a drawing-room, though I never use it."

"What about tea?"

"We'll have tea out of doors in the little summer-house, so you can save yourself the trouble of making the room look beautiful."

"I couldn't do that in its present condition. The best I could do would be to make it look pretty."

"There you go! Pretty and beautiful! What's the difference!"

"All the difference in the world," cried Hildred, pricked to an undesired discussion.

"Pray enlighten my ignorance," Mrs. Ivors leaned against the hall table as she lit a cigarette, and prepared to listen. It almost seemed as if she probed deliberately for the artist in Hildred, and as if the result hurt her more than it did the girl.

Hildred was roused to defend her young absorbed opinions: her worship of the beautiful was almost a religion with her.

"Ruskin says," she began.

"Oh, tell me in your own words. Don't fling Ruskin at me."

"My own words will be only an echo of his—that if a thing has once been really beautiful, any fragment of it which remains will still be beautiful, for instance the mutilated but lovely Dancing Maenad in Berlin, or the portion of the foot of the Venus de Milo." She would not mention her beloved winged Victory.

"I've been kicked with that foot before," said Mrs. Ivors drily. "Go on."

"On the other hand if you found a bit of a modern Dresden-china figure you would not know if it had even been pretty or not."

"Useless trash the whole lot," said Mrs. Ivors, blowing smoke-rings. "What's the good of prettiness after all? Pretty girls quickly change into plain elderly women. You'd never believe that I had been pretty once, would you?"

"Yes, I would. Why not? I saw you look twenty once."

"You saw me look twenty? May I ask when?"

"I think it was the day I came. I said something which piqued you, and you sparkled up and looked as you must have looked then."

"Did I? Well, I had my hour, I suppose, like most girls, and much good it did me. You are a queer child, Hildred. Now I must go and mark the tennis-ground."

"Can I help?"

"No. You'd probably spill the stuff all over the court. Perhaps Katherine will have something for you to do, but mind, I won't have any flowers on the tea-table. Some one is bound to knock 'em over if you put 'em there, and make what Katherine calls a splother."

"Very well," answered Hildred with a mock meekness which her dancing eyes belied.

She went to help Katherine, while Mrs. Ivors set about her self-appointed task with all the careless energy which characterised her undertakings. Although the old markings loomed white enough to guide her to accuracy she drove the machine with a Jehu-like recklessness which caused the lines to waver erratically here and there, noting sudden dashes with a splash of thickening and diminishing to an accurate illustration of Euclid's definition of a line when the machine began to require replenishing.

She was hot and exhausted by the time the court was marked, and she sat on the floor of the summer-house, with Tartar sprawling across her lap, to cool herself. Thoughts circled through her mind with such intensity that she let her cigarette go out. It was not often that she allowed herself time to think; the process was, to her, neither exhilarating nor amusing. At last, shaking Tartar off her lap with a sigh, she rose and went to the house to fetch a ball and club and practice putting on the tennis-ground.

"It's the very deuce to be idle," she said, ruefully. "If Dr. Lisle had said that any occupation was better than idleness I'd have agreed with him *in toto*. Was Hildred dabbling her fingers in the pie matrimonial, I wonder? I hope she's not going to develop into that sort of woman. There ought to be a clause in the Litany—'From all match-making women, Good Lord deliver us!' If I had been taught that prayer in my youth I mightn't have made such a mess of my life."

She putted with such unexpected force that the ball

dashed across the path and disappeared into a cabbage-patch, in which, probably, her guests would spend a goodly portion of their afternoon hunting for vanished tennis-balls.

* * * * *

Hildred looked forward to the advent of the Wavenys with mingled feelings, and an irresolution as regarded her own demeanour towards them. Should she cover Lady Waveney with confusion by reminding her of their former encounter? No, that would hurt too dreadfully; it would make the delinquent ashamed and miserable from the outset, and after all, she was her mother's guest. It was better to ignore the whole affair: not to intimate by so much as the flutter of an eyelash, unless she were forced to the acknowledgment, that she had ever seen the Wavenys before. And yet, they deserved to be taught a lesson. It was very ill-bred of them to discuss a relation so openly in the presence of a third and unknown person.

So swung the see-saw of Hildred's impulses, so wavered the decision of the thumbs: whether the errant lady was to be cast to the lions of remorse, or rescued to a grateful recognition of tactful disregard.

The prospect of immediate gaiety, however slight, also stirred the girl to a sense of quickened life, and it was with a pleasant tingle of excitement that she dressed for the tennis-party. Katherine had been most particular and hard to please about her toilette; had rejected frock after frock of her summer outfit with uplifted nose of scorn.

At last she made a definite suggestion.

"I'd like to see you in white," she said, "like you used to be when you was little."

"This is the best white for tennis," answered Hildred, picking out of the heap which bestreewd her bed a simple, soft white lawn, hand-embroidered with delicate stitchery.

"Yes, I suppose that'll do," said Katherine grudgingly. "It looks good for all it's so plain."

"It is good, you old goose! Wait till you see it on."

So when she was arrayed in her first summer whiteness she went down to the kitchen to undergo Katherine's inspection, and emerge with credit, if possible, from the fire of those critical eyes.

Katherine took in every detail, from the broad white hat with its simple curves and band of black-velvet to the silk-clocked stockings and white shoes.

"H'm. You'll do," she grunted.

Hildred pirouetted with delight. At that moment even the great Fadette's approval would have given her less pleasure than Katherine's grudging comment.

"There's one thing wanting, though. You needn't look so glum. Knowing the fancy you have for all them silly things I picked 'em this morning for you before the sun got too hot." Katherine produced from behind a plate on the dresser (where they had been carefully hidden from Hildred's eyes all the morning) a cluster of pale pink roses, half-blown, half-bud, exquisite and fragrant.

"There, in your belt. That's the place for 'em."

Hildred kissed the blossoms before she tucked them into her belt.

" Katherine, you're a fairy godmother in disguise ! " she cried.

" What disguise ? Aren't I a fairy right enough without any disguises at all ? " Katherine gave her grim chuckle. " Go along with you now out of my kitchen and give a busy woman time to breathe before them cormorants come pouncing down on us for their tea."

Hildred flitted out into the hall, half-excited, half-shy, at the thought of meeting her mother's friends. The sound of approaching voices stilled her dancing steps. She stopped, with a wild impulse of flight which might have sped her to her room if Mrs. Ivors had not caught sight of her through the open door.

" Ah, Hildred, there you are. Come and be introduced to my cousins and yours." Unwonted graciousness savoured Mrs. Ivors' tones. She put out a hand to the girl to draw her nearer.

Hildred went forward with concealed reluctance. The dreaded moment had arrived : were the thumbs to go up or down ?

The introduction was effected. Lady Waveney shook her hand and said : " Glad to meet you."

Sir John exclaimed in what Hildred called his " turnipy way,"

" So this is your daughter, Harry ? I thought she was a little girl from your description, and here you are springin' a young lady on us, eh ? Up to your tricks as usual, Harry. Never knew such a sport ! "

Both kindly country faces regarded the girl with interest, but to her relief, and perhaps a shade of chagrin, nothing more. There was no recognition in either

pair of eyes : no consciousness of ever having beheld " Harry's " daughter before. There had been no need for apprehension after all, no call upon her inner resources, no necessity for thumb-gymnastics, or tactful ignorings. With her ready blush, Hildred replied to the kindly greetings, feeling not unlike a pricked balloon. She did not realise that there was nothing essentially French about her appearance to-day, that in the white simplicity of her array, except for an unusual daintiness of detail and carefulness of hair-dressing, she closely resembled the average fresh, wholesome-looking English girl. White muslin and pink roses ? What could be more typical ? It would have needed a subtler observer than Lady Waveney to detect the tell-tale *nuances* of style.

" Fresh from the Continent and not a golfer ? " she was saying. " What a mercy you play tennis ! You must join the Standish tennis-club. It's quite a nice one. And we often play at Standish Court, too. You must come over some day."

" That would be very nice," answered Hildred flatly, noting the unconscious change of tone which always followed the discovery of her non-existence as a golfer. It amused her, and she laughed suddenly. It was a pleasant rippling sound, but Lady Waveney regarded her oddly. To laugh without a cause betokened an ill-balanced mind.

" Eccentric, like her poor father, I suppose," she commented mentally. " When Harry vaguely hinted at eccentricity I knew she meant madness. I wonder if he's shut up anywhere, or if his is only the harmless madness of all artistic people. One can't very well

mention the subject to Harry. Have you seen your father lately ? " she suddenly shot at Hildred.

" I am going to spend next winter with him in Egypt," Hildred replied, startled into a statement.

" Oh. That will be quite nice. At least for those who care for travelling, as I presume you do." She talked down to Hildred, as if the implication included her own personal superiority to such desires. " I don't. My husband persuaded me to go to Paris for my honeymoon, but I was afraid to eat anything but ham there for fear I should get frogs or snails ! Ugh ! Such an idea ! No, England's good enough for me."

Hildred laughed again. She wondered if the phrase crystallised the great article of Faith in this neighbourhood, and how many more times she should hear it before she left Burnaby.

Mrs. Ivors was talking to Sir John, and Hildred caught snatches of the conversation. It was about dogs and their pedigrees.

" This chap of yours," she heard him say as he playfully buffeted Tartar, " is a horrid mongrel, Harry."

" I know he is, but he's affectionate and very faithful."

" Yes, that's the only virtue mongrels have, the brutes."

" A pity it isn't contagious," said Hildred. " I don't think human mongrels have it."

" Come, come," said Sir John, " that's a cuttin' remark from a young lady like you."

" Is it ? " asked Hildred, opening innocent eyes. " I didn't mean it that way."

The wicket-gate opened to admit Miss Arabella Lebarte and Dr. Lisle.

"Derived from dog," Hildred murmured. "Excuse me, I must go to meet Miss Lebarte."

With a sense of relief she flew off round the curve of the little drive, leaving Lady Waveney once and for all confirmed in her belief in the girl's eccentricity.

"Well, have you got the prize?" she cried as she caught Arab Lebarte by the hand and smiled up at her.

"My dear girl, the result won't be out for a fortnight."

Hildred's face fell. "How horribly slow! I thought they would have told you at once."

"Competitions teach you patience, if nothing else," said Arab with a resigned smile.

"And in a desert island like this," put in Dr. Lisle, "you've got to be thankful for a fortnightly post."

"A desert island, Dr. Lisle! Come now, that's a little too bad," said Miss Arab archly.

"Well, I withdraw desert, then. That's the worst of talking to you clever people. You are always so keen on accuracy. Now, if I wanted to express the essence of solitude by saying that I was alone in a crowd, you would tell me that it was not solitude really, because I was surrounded by people."

"I certainly should. How well you understand me, Dr. Lisle."

Hildred looked at her with a swift pity. She wore a mauve linen gown which seemed to accentuate her hard brightness, and she swung her racquet restlessly to and fro as she spoke.

"But only those who see take off their shoes," the girl quoted softly.

"Yes, and the bare-foot craze hasn't yet reached Burnaby," answered Dr. Lisle in the same tone.

"Now if you two are going to cap quotations I'm off! I only know the usual old tags, and can't even quote those correctly." Arab felt a sense of emancipation to-day which tinged her with renewed vivacity. She had met Dr. Lisle at the gate, and had had a friendly verbal tussle as to whether she should carry her own racquet or not, in which she, being but a foolish virgin, won.

Hildred responded to the atmosphere of youth, or approximate youth exhaled by the two. There was a soft pleasure in the certainty of comprehension by the one, and a cheery knowledge of appreciated companionship in the other.

They followed Mrs. Ivors and the Waveney's round the house and through the kitchen-garden to the tennis-ground.

"You two girls are to play with the men first," said Mrs. Ivors, "and Laura and I will look on. Then we shall have our usual foursome."

Hildred fell to the lot of Sir John, whose figure owned a shade too much profile to permit him to be a really active tennis-player. He thought it part of his duty to keep up a running fire of chaffing comments on every stroke, to which Hildred, unused to such give and take, responded but briefly. As he confided to his wife afterwards:

"I couldn't get a word out of that girl of Harry's. Nothin' in her, nothin' at all. She's a pretty little

thing enough—" (Hildred considered herself tall, but it was Sir John's way to speak of all girls as little unless they were positive giantesses!)—" but if she has only her smile and complexion to go on they won't carry her far. No sense of humour either—can't see a joke that even a baby would laugh at. Doesn't take after old Harry in any way. Suppose she's dull like the painter chap, eh?"

But to Mrs. Ivors' carefully-concealed pride Hildred played what Sir John called "a rippin' game of tennis," a game which should go far towards atoning for her golfing deficiencies in a family of games enthusiasts.

Sir John was a little hot and begged for a moment's grace before a fresh game was started. Mrs. Ivors, whose energy required outlet, began to practise serving to Dr. Lisle.

"Lisle's an active little chap," said Sir John, moping his forehead. "Ought to be with that figure."

"Rather like a monkey, don't you think?" put in Lady Waveney.

"No, I don't," replied Hildred, to whom the remark was addressed, hating the discussion. "There's nothing in the least like a monkey about him, except perhaps his eyes."

"His light blue eyes? I never saw a monkey with blue eyes," ejaculated Lady Waveney, while Arab, mute, plucked tufts of grass from the bank on which they sat.

"Not the colour, the expression." Hildred felt impelled to elucidate her thought. "A monkey's eyes have always a wistful, half-human expression in them, and Dr. Lisle's eyes, to carry out the analogy on a

higher plane, have always a wistful, half-spiritual expression."

"Has any one a dictionary?" asked Sir John, humorously, "I haven't heard so many long words since I was a schoolboy." He still tried to chaff Harry's little girl: he had a tenacious mind and one of his fixed beliefs was that all "young 'uns" as he called them, liked chaff.

Hildred reddened. She had stupidly drawn aside a corner of her veil of reticence and their coarse fingers had torn it.

"Come on, Jack. You must be cool enough now," said his wife. "I'm getting cramped from sitting still so long." •

When they were out of hearing Hildred turned on a wave of indignation to Arab, sure of sympathy.

"Oh, these people with their inert minds and their restless bodies!" she cried. "I can't bear them, can you?"

"Oh, well, the Waveneys are really very nice," murmured Arab. "They give delightful tennis-parties, and Standish Court is a lovely old place."

To speak disparagingly of the Waveneys implied more courage than Arabella Leberte possessed. The Waveneys were—well, the Waveneys, and Standish Court was—Standish Court. There was nothing within a fifteen-mile radius to compare with them, and, if there had been, comparisons in such a case would have been more than odious; they would have been almost sacrilegious.

Hildred, of course, could not understand; she was imbued with queer foreign notions: she had been

brought up outside the pale of the Waveney tradition, the centuries-old tradition of race. There had always been a Sir John Waveney since Norman William, and in the Domesday-Book——

No, Hildred could not realise the daring even of Arab's qualified statement as regarded the Waveneys' niceness. Had it not been for the monkey-comparison she would have fluttered the Waveney banner in the face of all comers.

"I'm sorry," said Hildred, cooling as quickly as she had warmed, and withdrawing once more into her shell. "Of course, that's all that matters—in the country."

CHAPTER IX

THE CAGE OF DREAMS

SO Hildred slid into her groove and the summer became a certainty of warm days and star-jewelled nights, chequered occasionally by brief thunderstorms, and the benediction of the rain.

Mrs. Ivors took her to the Standish Tennis Club, where she became popular in her quiet way—friendly to all, yet in the inner sense of the word friends with none, except Arab Leberte and Dr. Lisle.

Standish Court with its immemorial elms, its carp-pond, and its yew-garden delighted her, but to study its treasures and play with her small cousins pleased her better than to spend much time in the society of their parents.

She went for walks with the dogs, she helped Katherine when permitted, and she made a real and beautiful little bit of garden for the joy of her soul. The larch-wood was her favourite retreat ; she often sat among their slim pillared stems which rose straight and tall above a miniature forest of ferns.

Still—"Time glides by and we grow old with the silent years ; and the days flee away and are restrained by no rein." Summer had merged into September almost before Hildred was aware, and the thought of impending departure filled her with a vague uneasiness

and a sense of unrest. She had grown used to the quiet monotony of her days, the little joys, the little interests, the passing amusements, the stimulating encounters with her mother, whose habit of mind, like flint on flint, always struck sparks from her own.

On a golden September day Hildred, basket in hand, set off to ask Arab Leberte to come blackberrying with her.

She found her in the garden bending over a long bed, a third of which showed brown earth free from weeds about the flower-roots while the remainder bore a suspiciously weedlike greenness. At the back of the bed tall Michaelmas daisies raised masses of white and purple bloom, which in their sturdy autumnal flowering reminded Hildred a little of Arab herself.

She lifted a hot tired face to the girl.

"No, Hildred, I can't come blackberrying, much as I should like it."

"Why?"

Arab waved an earthy glove towards the flower-bed. "Auntie says this must be done before she comes back, and as you see it's not half finished yet."

"What a task-mistress! Can't you rebel?"

Arab straightened herself wearily. "You don't understand. Let's sit down on the seat under the apple-tree for a minute. It's nice to rest for a bit."

"I understand that Miss Leberte exacts a good deal from you."

"Oh, no, no. You mustn't say that. Auntie is goodness itself. She has been a mother to me since poor mamma died, and I never could do enough for her."

"It shouldn't be all giving and all taking," said Hildred hotly, remembering her mother's dictum. "That's rather a one-sided arrangement."

"You're quite wrong," said Arab, reddening furiously. "If there is any taking it's on my side. Poor papa died without leaving a penny, and of course as clergymen always marry paupers, poor mamma hadn't a farthing, so except for the few shillings I make by my competitions I am dependent on auntie for everything, *everything*. Only for her I should be one of the miserable incapables who drudge along as nursery governesses or mother's helps, for I was trained for nothing and hadn't much education anyhow. Marriage was the only career open to me, and except in penny novelettes people don't wish to marry pauper orphans!"

Hildred was mute, shocked to silence by the sudden pitiful outburst. She had no words, but she squeezed the earthy gloved hands which lay on Arab's lap.

"I should have loved a home of my own," Arab continued, words tumbling out through the seldom-opened floodgates. "Good and kind as auntie is, it's not the same. A home which I could have made pretty, which I could have ordered well, and where I could have tried all sorts of experiments; where I had some independence, where there was no necessity to give an account of my comings and goings, and an accurate description of all my movements, except when I cared to, to a—a person who would be interested just because they were *my* movements, and not because I might have been doing something foolish. I'd like to do something foolish, just for a change. I'm tired,

deadly tired, of always being sensible, always doing and saying the right, the *expected* thing! I've often envied you your powers of speech——"

"Me?" cried Hildred.

"Yes, you. Clever, thoughtful, original things seem just to slip off your tongue without an effort. You have the courage of your ideas, and the self-confidence to give vent to them, while I, even if I think the things, have neither the pluck nor the wit to say them. I can listen and envy and agree. I could even write them perhaps, but when I want the golden tongue of Chrysostom, I am dumb, dumb as the man possessed by a devil."

"Poor Arab! I never guessed you felt like that."

"Of course you didn't. Nobody does, and nobody ever will. I don't either, as a rule, only somehow to-day it all came over me in a rush, and I feel that I could fall down and worship and kiss the feet of the man who would come like a knight of old romance and rescue me from the dragons of my own narrowness and stupidity." She paused, breathless, borne on the wings of her rebellion with a flight that brought a carmine flush to her cheeks, an inspired light to her eyes. For the moment she looked brilliant, vivid to amazement. One could believe that no man need want the spur of chivalry to send him, hot-foot, to her capture. Then the light faded; the flame died. Here was no Brunhild in her ring of fire, but Arab Leberte, an unsought woman of thirty-five, her age written in her fixed complexion and every tell-tale line.

Her voice went on, almost monotonous now in its

low intensity, as if she had dropped from the heights to the plains of reality: her eyes were fixed as on some vision of her own summoning. Hildred thought of her mother's horizon metaphor.

"I could love him, worship him, work for him. My best would be too poor for him. I'd work my fingers to the bone, and follow him barefoot round the world if he desired it——" a low sob shook her voice and warned Hildred that she was losing control.

She flung a dash of Mrs. Ivors' common sense, cold-water-like, upon the trembling warmth of the words.

"It would be much more sensible if you stayed at home and darned his stockings."

Arab essayed a laugh—a quivering effort.

"How I'd love to darn his stockings!" she said dreamily.

"It seems to me that we are getting a little mixed in our metaphors," Hildred put in briskly, her heart swelling with sympathy, but her generous impulses warning her to prevent Arab from making an admission she might regret later. "Did knights of old wear stockings, I wonder? We really must stick to one period for our imaginary hero and clothe him accordingly. Dear Arab, I understand——" she leaned over and kissed her cheek softly. "How I wish I could see him come riding over the brow of the hill!"

"That's a sight you'll never see," said Arab brusquely, rising and shaking the earth from her lap. "Please forget all the rubbish I've been talking, Hildred. That's the worst of you sympathetic people, you tempt others to make fools of themselves. I generally keep

my dreams shut up in a cage, but you somehow opened the door and let them out."

"They'll fly back again. That is the beauty of one's own dreams; they couldn't be happy with any one else."

"Do they make one happy or unhappy, I wonder?"

"'Work grows fair through starry dreaming,'" quoted Hildred.

"There you are!" cried Arab, fondly envious, "saying just the right, but not the obvious thing. 'Work grows fair through starry dreaming.' Yes. Let's put it into practice and see if my starry dreams will help me to weed that bed." She struck her hands together, shaking off the caked earth.

"Let me help you."

"Certainly not. I must do penance for my wild, ungrateful, indelicate talk. After all, life, which must be lived, is prose. Dreams which come but rarely are poetry—useless frippery, as your mother would say. There are no heroes nowadays, only common-place, ordinary men who get colds in their heads and sniff unromantically." Her eyes gazed with a veiled brightness at the old horizon. "Well, I'd wash his pocket-handkerchiefs," she said defiantly.

Hildred swung her basket to and fro. "Devotion could go no further," she laughed. "But don't let him know all that beforehand."

Arab darted a suspicious glance at her which fell harmlessly off the mask of Hildred's unconsciousness. "Don't let who know?"

"The catarrhal hero," she returned with deliberate lightness. "The not impossible he, whoever he be."

Katherine has a proverb—'Keep the bone and the dog will follow you.' "

"You may keep the bone so long that the dog won't want to follow you," said Arab, with a ring of the old hidden bitterness. "What is one to do then? Bury it decently, I suppose, and say no more about it. Ugh! how horribly vulgar we are! Why do you tempt me to such unladylike freedom of speech, Hildred?"

"I don't think I said very much."

"Your silence then—silence is provocative. It makes you want to hurl words about—words which you may regret bitterly afterwards."

"I don't think you need regret anything you've said to me to-day. It shall go no further than this bench. Even the apple-tree is bribing me to silence," she said, trying to lighten the tension, as a rosy peach-apple dropped into her lap.

The September sky shone blue through the yellowing leaves, and the apples against it looked like jewels set in a green-gold tracery.

Arab had one of her rare moments of softening.

"I don't think I shall regret it," she said, looking at the girl with an expression in which warring emotions stirred and strove. "O sweet and twenty, O little Eve, hasn't your Apple of Wisdom told you of the terrible handicap of years?"

Hildred was puzzled. "I don't understand you."

"You will some day," returned Arab, enigmatically. "Until you came I didn't understand myself. However, Katherine has another saying. 'Keep your own doorstep clean, and you needn't bother about any one else's.' "

"Which is a polite way of telling me to mind my own business."

"No, it isn't. It's an apt illustration of my own life. My doorstep is spotlessly, respectably clean, but no one but you has any idea of what's inside."

"It's a garden—a garden full of good impulses and unselfishness."

"A garden full of weeds."

"Who ever saw a garden without them? And if there are a few, why, you're an expert weeder, Arab."

"Oh, go away. If you say any more soft things to me I shall cry and look a sight when auntie comes in, and I shan't be able to give any satisfactory explanation."

"Say I beat you," Hildred suggested, "because you beat me at tennis yesterday."

"Do you want an earthy embrace?" asked Arab. "Because if you don't I advise you to go."

"I certainly don't. You know I'm not a really kissy person."

"I know you're not, thank heaven!" cried Arab, as she sank emblematically on her knees before a great clump of golden-rod.

CHAPTER X

WILD FRUIT

HILDRED'S eyes shone as she left the Hill-side garden, and skirting the village took a detour through lane and field towards the larch-wood, by whose stream the best and biggest blackberries grew.

She felt moved out of her young quietude by Arab's outburst. To come face to face with passion, even though unexpressed, is one of the experiences which teaches, and it was strangely disturbing to see love, unsought, peering from the eyes of a woman who, one had thought, had long since ceased to seek its reflection in other eyes.

Love, in personal guise, had not as yet touched Hildred. She had her dreams, of course, the intangible, rainbow-winged dreams of youth, but they had not materialised further than man in the abstract ; a possible vision of glorified comradeship, which her modern upbringing had taught her to relegate to its proper place in the scheme of things. She did not regard marriage, as Arab did, as the crock of gold at the rainbow's foot, to be eagerly sought for in the hope that when found it would be a talisman to turn the whole world to a garden of roses lit perennially by a golden honey moon !

Her sole acquaintance with married life, or half of it,

had taught her an early and enforced wisdom. " Marriage lasts longer than the honeymoon " was a favourite comment of Katherine's on the honourable estate, and if its light and shade were never to chequer her life she would not write herself down a failure, as Arab Leberte was prone to do in the bitterness of her soul.

She was young, she wanted to look into Life's mirror, to drink deep of Life's cup before she ventured on the great experiment, if Fate ever gave her the chance.

She took off her hat as she walked through the field towards the gap—the field where now she gathered morning mushrooms instead of magic dew—and the afternoon sun fell full on her fair hair and touched it with glints of brightness. The year was spinning slowly and goldenly towards its close, scarcely conscious as yet of having left the valley of summer to rise towards the bare austerities of winter.

The girl sang softly as she looked at the distant blue hills, dismissing the thought of Arab's self-revelation with a feeling that was half-shock, half-pity. She had no yearning to play with fire, perhaps to scorch herself in undesired flames. She wanted to live her own life untrammelled, impatient, as youth ever is, of restraint ; too young and inexperienced to realise that the chains of self, of character, of temperament, invisible as gossamer though they be, can bind and fetter closer than bonds of steel.

It was in this mood that Dr. Lisle found her, as he came up the path which led from the valley, and met her descending through the wood. He was in riding attire, and he did not look at all surprised to see her as he sauntered along, tapping his gaiter with his riding-switch.

Hildred stopped when she saw him. Was it that her eyes were newly opened, or did a subdued radiance light his thin brown face? He looked trim, alert, purposeful as he came forward and took her hand, and his eyes shone.

"I've been to a distant corner of my kingdom ushering a new life into this queer old world," he said. "Since then I've been to church in your wood, where, from information received, I thought I should find you."

"Katherine?"

"You must not try to tap my sources of private information." He took the basket from Hildred's hand, and something new in the glance of his blue eyes brought the ready flush racing to her cheek.

She rushed into speech. "I went to Hillside to see if Arab Leberte could come blackberrying with me, but she couldn't."

"I'm very glad."

With Arab's outburst fresh in her memory Hildred gave a little embarrassed laugh.

"That doesn't sound quite kind," she murmured.

"It is—to me," he returned quietly. "I hate a three-cornered conversation, and so do you, if you would only admit it."

"We have had a good many of them."

"Are they stamped on your memory in letters of gold? You know they're not. I know how to appreciate a solitude of two when I get it. Come down into the wood and talk to me. I never see you alone. If your mother isn't there, Arab Leberte is, or someone to make the unnecessary triangle. I can't talk to several people at a time, can you?"

"No," Hildred admitted, her hand resting against the grey trunk of a beech, round whose roots sprang up innumerable saplings whose young green gave an illusion of spring.

It seemed to Dr. Lisle as he looked at the slender figure with its leafy background that here was the spirit of the almond-tree as he had seen it materialised on that unforgotten May morning. His heart gave a great leap: he seemed to hear the cuckoo calling: to feel youth and life and spring riot in his veins, to thrill to the faint far echo of the pipes of Pan, the call of Nature, who supplies her own answer to the eternal question.

He gave no sign of the rushing impulses within him as he stood there still tapping his switch, his eyes on the down-bent glowing face. The silence was scarcely marked before he spoke, as a yellowing leaf drifted slowly down on Hildred's hair.

"There's a fallen fir-tree near the stream, which makes a throne fit for a queen. I will enthrone you there and feed you with 'apricocks and dewberries,' or their equivalent in blackberries and wild strawberries. Will you come?"

There was something in the tone of his question which set Hildred's pulses racing, but with an effort she shook off her unaccustomed embarrassment, and caught at an answerable phrase.

"Wild strawberries? I did not think that there were any so late as this."

"I found a patch of them near a mossy boulder, but I didn't pick any. I wanted to share them with you."

"To share them with me? How generous of you!"

"How selfish, you mean. Things shared have a savour that solitary pleasures never possess. Don't you think so?"

"It all depends on whom you share them with," returned Hildred, with a touch of her mother's directness.

Dr. Lisle laughed. "There is no question of the added savour in this case, then. I was well justified in my action."

"How did you know I should come?"

"All things come to him who knows how to wait."

"Do you know how to wait?" asked Hildred.

"It is the one art in which I am really proficient," he answered, with a very direct glance. A sense of his inner excitement tingled unaware through the quiet words.

Hildred followed him in silence as he led the way down the winding path, holding aside bramble and sapling from contact with her until they came to the fallen fir whose rough red trunk lay across a carpet of dry scented needles.

It was a mute month for birds: only an occasional chirp, or the dropping of leaf or twig broke the wood-stillness.

"Sit there," commanded Dr. Lisle, "and I will make a feast for you."

Hildred sat down on the trunk, and folded her hands in her lap. A new spirit of gaiety suddenly seized her. It was good to be young, good to be alive, good to have a friend like this, who cared, as poor Arab had said, whether she came or went. Dr. Lisle was right. A solitude of two *was* a solitude to be appreciated. She felt a wave of agreement with all the old saws

which proved the point as she looked at him with a little smile.

"I, too, know how to wait."

He shot a swift glance at her, and shook his head.

"Not as I do. You're too young yet."

"We shan't quarrel about it. I bow to your superiority—of years." They both laughed. Dr. Lisle's mood was infectious to-day.

He moved quickly here and there, vanishing for a moment among the trees, returning to arrange his feast on the far side of the fir.

"You mustn't look until I give you leave."

"Not even a peep?"

"Not even a peep." He paused and looked at her.

"Don't you like my cheek in ordering you about?"

"I think I do," she said, her eyes on the pine-needles. "It makes me feel——"

"Feel what?" he asked, coming closer.

Hildred drew back slightly.

"It makes me feel as if I were young again and back with my cousins who exacted implicit obedience."

"Did you live in your youth with cousins?"

"Yes. Didn't you know?"

Dr. Lisle shook his head. "You shall tell me later. I'd like to know about the child you, everything about you——" he stopped abruptly, and turned away. In a moment he came back and dropped on one knee before her.

"Her Majesty is served," he said, bowing his head.

Hildred rose and went to the other side of the fir-trunk. A broad mossy stone as table bore a yellow frond of bracken heaped high with purple blackberries,

while two fern-leaves, deftly twisted, made a green basket for clusters of rose and white wild strawberries plucked on their own stems. Between the dryad's dishes of fruit stood the narrow silver cup of a flask, brimming with clear water.

Hildred smiled and drew a breath of joy.

"It is a feast fit for Titania!" she cried.

"It is a feast fit for you, which is more to the point," he returned, sitting lowly at her feet. "What will you begin on?"

"That is puzzling. Which do you recommend?"

"I should advise the strawberries first," said Marcus Lisle gravely. "The blackberry juice will probably stain your fingers."

"I can wash them in the stream——"

"And dry them with my silk handkerchief." He drew the corner of a folded white square from his breast-pocket.

"You must share," she insisted, holding up a stem with two ripe strawberries on it.

"Yes, if you will feed me with them. Recollect that I had all the trouble of gathering them."

"I thought you hinted that it was a pleasure."

"One has to find reasons for unusual requests."

"Oh, I don't mind feeding you," Hildred laughed.

"Besides, I have a constitutional objection to soiling my hands——"

"Enough! enough!" cried Hildred, putting a strawberry into his mouth. "One reason *is* a reason, two or more turn into foolish excuses."

"Don't scold me, nymph of the almond-tree. Let me eat wild fruit to my undoing."

"It is of your own plucking, remember," said Hildred.

He turned sharply. Were the words meant as a warning, or were they only in tune with his?

The fair face was soft and smiling, the thick fringe of lashes did not hide the kindness of the grey eyes. Suddenly he realised how much this girl meant to him. The nymph of the almond-tree had stepped from fantasy to solid earth—earth as solid as is ever seen in lover's vision. She had merged from dryad to dream-woman, to the one woman in the world of the real and ideal.

He looked up at her again, veiling the ardour in his eyes. She sat above him, serenely unconscious of her transformation, yet with a sweet stirring at her heart which should have warned her.

"Now it is time for the blackberries," she said, demurely.

Was ever such a feast? Every time the pink fingers approached his lips it seemed to Marcus Lisle like the echo of a caress. Sometimes they softly touched him and his spirit soared in ecstasy. Whatever life brought hereafter to these two few joys could have the exquisite evanescence, the uncapturable fragrance of that fugitive hour in the wood.

When all the blackberries were finished Lisle handed her the silver cup. When she had drunk from it he drank also.

"I wish it were of glass that I might break it," he said in an undertone.

"Why?" asked Hildred innocently.

"So that no other lips than ours should ever touch it," he returned.

Hildred blushed deeply and turned away to dabble her fingers in the stream. She did not look at Dr. Lisle, but kept her back to him as she played with the water, letting it trickle over her hands, and shaking the drops in crystal showers from her pink finger-tips.

A firm step brought him to her side.

"You must have washed them sufficiently by this," said Marcus Lisle. "Let me dry them for you."

He shook out the silk handkerchief and caught the half-reluctant hands in its folds, drying them carefully, finger by finger. There was a reverence mingled with the sweet intimacy of the action which touched while it vaguely troubled Hildred. She drew her hands away.

"What about your own?" she asked. "Oh, you've scratched yourself."

Dr. Lisle examined a mark or two.

"It's nothing. I didn't know the brambles had scratched me. You see, I was gathering the fruit for you," he said, with a sudden smile which lit up his whole face.

Hildred turned as if to go. "Perhaps I had better——"

"No. Why? Have I tired you already?"

"Oh, no."

"Then stay and talk for a little longer. This is my hour. Don't shorten it. Tell me your dreams."

Hildred sat down again on the fir-tree, while Dr. Lisle stretched himself on the ground at her feet with a sigh of content. She patted and prodded the red flakes of the fir-bark in a sudden access of shyness.

"My dreams are prosaic enough," she said, turning her face so that he could only see the soft young curve

of her cheek. "Don't you want to smoke? You may if you wish."

"No, thanks. The dryads wouldn't like it. You would hear them shiver in their trees if I dared to commit such sacrilege." He touched the hem of her skirt unseen. "Tell me your dreams," he said again, in a voice which trembled a little.

Hildred did not notice: she was suddenly wrapt in the cloud of her own thoughts.

"I have wanted to tell you things, not dreams, ever since the day—do you remember it, I wonder?—when you showed me how to find the fairy paint-brushes in the periwinkles and the doves in the columbines, and told me that it was your mother who had shown them to you when you were a little boy."

"I remember."

"No one ever showed me those things when I was a child. Tell me more about your mother."

Slowly at first Marcus Lisle opened his heart and spoke, as a man speaks to the one woman, of the things which lay nearest to it. There was nothing new in the simple story he told her: there will never be anything new in it as long as the love of mother for children endures, or the spirit of courage, patience and self-sacrifice continues to animate women. He told her how that gay young mother, left with a meagre income, had worked and striven to support and educate him and his sister: how when the worst of the struggle was over, when he was earning enough money by teaching to help himself through college, and when his sister was trained as a nurse, a sudden chill had attacked the delicate frame which had withstood so much at need,

and taken the mother from the two who could now begin to repay her in more than love.

"And your sister?" asked Hildred softly.

"She married a Dr. Marston with a big poor practice in Birmingham. When I was qualified I went to him as assistant, and learned chiefly how little I knew of life or anything else. Then he died, worn out from a typhoid epidemic, poor chap, and left me enough money to buy this practice; and Marion, who had no children of her own, started a Children's Hospital in Surrey, of which she is still the matron."

"Ah, but you *had* a home. You *had* a happy childhood in spite of poverty," breathed Hildred, answering her own thoughts rather than his words.

Marcus Lisle looked up startled.

"Yes, I certainly had. Hadn't you?"

"I—oh, I don't know. I thought I had at the time, but—but that isn't all that matters." She paused for a moment on the edge of confidence, then plunged. "Dr. Lisle, I don't know how much or how little of our affairs is known to you. I don't know what my mother has told people, or what she wishes left unsaid. I never had the courage to ask her, but I don't want to tell anything that she doesn't wish to be known."

"Your mother has told me that she and your father agreed long ago to separate and live their own lives in their own way, and that you—" his tone changed and softened—"were finishing your education on the Continent in accordance with their wishes."

"Then I can betray no confidences, for that is all I know myself." Her cheeks burned; her energy

quickenèd ; she plucked flakes from the tree-trunk feverishly. " Dr. Lisle, I never saw my mother that I can remember until I came to Burnaby."

Dr. Lisle pulled his cap over his eyes, and turned on his elbow. " Yes? " he returned quietly, as if he heard such startling announcements every day of his life.

Hildred felt relieved at his calm acceptance of her statement, and continued in jerky, broken sentences which left a good deal to the hearer's imagination.

" I spent my childhood with two elderly cousins at Wilmerhurst. . . . Such an ordered life, placid, conventional. . . . I accepted things as they came. I was very incurious. I led the ordinary school-life, select and expensive. The cousins were very kind in the holidays. I—suppose—I missed nothing at the time. I had a year in Germany, in France, in Italy, and last spring an expectation of settling down for the summer at Wilmerhurst before I—Then came the bombshell."

" What bombshell? "

" Coming here. I was quite frightened beforehand. It shattered all my plans and hopes for the present."

" Your plans and hopes, then, had nothing to do with Burnaby? "

" Of course not," answered Hildred with unconscious cruelty. " When I leave this——" -

" Are you going away? " He caught the fragment of skirt which brushed across his hand as if with such light capture he could prevent her flight.

" Yes. Didn't you know? "

" No." All the brightness had faded from his tone.

"When I leave Burnaby next month——"

"So soon?"

"Yes," she answered gently, trying to keep out of her words the absurd pang she felt at the thought of going away. "When I leave Burnaby next month I am to prepare to spend the winter in Egypt with my father."

"And then?"

"And then I am to choose what I shall do."

"You have a choice?"

"Like Portia's suitors, three." She tried to speak lightly, but the tonelessness of Dr. Lisle's voice awoke in her the ridiculous fancy that she had inadvertently killed the joy of the woodland hour. "I am to live with my mother, or my father, or choose a career for myself."

"Of course you can make no decision as yet."

"Of course not. If my father really needs me I may feel that I ought to stay with him."

"Does that mean that Burnaby is out of the running?" Dr. Lisle's cap blotted out his present surroundings, but it was sufficiently transparent to enable him to see his dreams, one by one, taking flight.

"Quite," said Hildred with unnecessary emphasis.

"You couldn't make up your mind to stay here in any case?"

"I must go to Egypt first."

"But afterwards?" he queried softly. He had gathered together quite a respectable pile of fir-needles. It appeared to be an absorbing occupation: it looked almost as if he were burying something under them. Perhaps he was. Who knows?

Hildred rushed into unconsidered speech. It seemed as if she were trying to convince herself as well as her hearer, and in consequence she became over-vehement.

"Oh, Dr. Lisle, can you imagine it? I should be miserable here. It is all very well to be here as a visitor in the summer, to have people kind enough to help to amuse one, but for one's life! It would choke me, stifle me! What could I do? How could I fill my days? How keep my mind alive in a place where nobody talks of anything but games, and people's only mental recreation is to criticise their neighbours."

Dr. Lisle placed a dry little cone on the top of his mound.

"And so you were miserable here?" he asserted softly.

Hildred flushed deeper, half-ashamed of her outburst. "Oh, no, I didn't mean that."

"And you found no one congenial in Burnaby?" he persisted.

"I didn't mean that either. You know I didn't."

"How do I know?" he asked, looking up quickly and scattering his mound of fir-needles.

"Because I found *you*," she answered frankly, laying her hand for a moment on his shoulder. "You are my friend."

Dr. Lisle jumped up. The fir needles fled far and wide, and there was nothing beneath them after all!

"Aren't you?" asked Hildred shyly.

"Your friend," he repeated with a half-smile. "Well, we'll leave it at that—for the present. I've had my accolade."

"Do you consider it my duty to stay with my mother?" asked Hildred hurriedly. "She doesn't really need me. She is perfectly happy as long as she can play golf or any kind of game, and Katherine looks after her better than I ever could."

"No, I don't," answered Dr. Lisle abruptly. "Your duty is to wait until you come to the fork in the roads, and then be sure that you take the right one."

"How shall I know which is the right one?"

"How can I tell? I can't preach, but—I think one's path lies tolerably clear, even when one comes to a cross-road."

"I haven't come to mine yet."

"No. Your road at present goes straight on after the next turning—the October turning. October! I shall have no one then to share my sylvan feasts. My literal red-letter days will be post days."

"Post days?" Hildred echoed.

"Yes. You write to your friends, don't you?" he asked quickly.

"Sometimes."

"Will you write to me?"

"Yes, if you wish."

"I do wish it," he returned gravely. "Friendship to me means no light thing."

"Nor to me," she put in quickly.

"Friendship with you," he began and stopped. "You won't forget to-day, will you?"

"No."

"Nor I." Something stronger than truth, something deeper than sincerity rang through the short sentences. "When you want a friend remember

that I am here. It's more than words, remember. Just as this hour outweighs empty years."

"I'll remember."

"And I shall wait in a solitude of one."

"You will have Arab Leberte," said Hildred, with a sudden wave of loyalty towards her friend.

Dr. Lisle smiled, and addressing a robin which had just perched, bright-eyed and tentative, on a branch overhead, said: "Bird, it is an odd fact that the best of women, even though they know you crave for bread will offer you a stone with the smiling assumption that it is a perfectly possible substitute."

"I——" began Hildred.

"I was speaking to the robin," said Marcus Lisle, tapping the fir-needles from his clothes with his riding switch.

The bird hopped a little nearer, flirted its tail and flew away.

"Apparently he does not appreciate your conversation."

"He knows how to give a hint," said Marcus Lisle. "Come. We had better be getting back. My hour is over. 'Nous n'irons plus au bois, les lauriers sont coupés.' I will see you safely to Whitecot and then——" he paused.

"And then?"

"Then I shall go home and begin to practise my art."

"What art?" asked Hildred thoughtlessly.

"The art of waiting," he answered with a look which made her pulses race again.

CHAPTER XI

GHOSTS

AS the time for Hildred's departure drew near Mrs. Ivors evinced an increased restlessness, which merged on occasions into spurts of crankiness ; not actual outbursts of temper, but a cross tendency to be pleased with nothing.

The days cooled and shortened : a period of bad weather shook the yellowing leaves from the trees, and hastened the look of autumnal austerity.

A day's golf generally implied a wetting, and Katherine grew weary of stuffing wet boots with straw to preserve their shape, and of endlessly drying dripping skirts and soaked woollen coats.

"What pleasure you can find in getting wet to the skin every day beats me !" she said at last.

"It isn't the getting wet pleases me," said Mrs. Ivors—"it's the game—the game that's so very well worth the candle."

"What candle ?" sniffed Katherine. "I think you go out and get wet just to forget that young miss is going away."

"Katherine, you're a greater idiot even than I thought you, which is saying a good deal," retorted Mrs. Ivors, tramping restlessly about the kitchen. "It will be quite pleasant to have the house to ourselves again."

"Pleasant my eye," said Katherine rudely. "'Twill be like a house of the dead with young miss gone, and you out all day."

"It was a necessary experiment, Katherine, and we have got to pay whatever it's cost us. It has been a greater success than I, personally, ever anticipated. Hildred is a girl one might be pleased to take anywhere." She unfastened her skirt and let it drop on the floor.

Katherine, who was swinging the water out of her golf-coat, paused at the words with the thick gray twist over her arm.

"If you're as cold-hearted as you pretend to be you ought to be well ashamed of yourself," she cried, her hard face working. "You don't deserve to have a daughter!"

"I never wanted one," said Mrs. Ivors, abruptly, her lips thinning, while a look of anguish came into her eyes.

She left the kitchen in her knickerbockers and stocking-feet, and strode upstairs, a figure suddenly touched with tragedy despite the grotesqueness of her attire.

Hildred, too, was conscious of a sense of impending loss. It would cost her a greater pang to leave Burnaby than she had anticipated. She seemed to have fitted so easily into her little niche. She would be really sorry to leave Whitecot; to part from Arab Leberte, who had never stepped outside her normal acceptance of the inevitable since that one wild moment; from Dr. Lisle, whom she had seen but seldom since that hour in the wood whose memory was hidden deeply in the

warmest corner of her heart. She deliberately avoided probing below the surface for meanings, though his words rang bells of melody in her ears. The future was wrapped in a sun-shot haze, and of course it would be ridiculous to let one's imagination run riot and read shades of sentiment into a hinted capacity for patience.

Between her and her mother a sort of armed friendship had sprung up. Consciously or unconsciously each was on the defensive. The weapons of war were rarely laid aside, or if so, only within easy arm's reach. In tastes and temperament they were jarringly dissimilar, with a dissimilarity set apart at so wide an angle that the meeting-point could only be in eternity. Still, they had something in common, a mutual courage of action and outlook, a frankness, a love of truth and honesty. There was a meeting-ground of characteristics if not of actual character.

Late one evening after dinner, an evening of fire-light, candle-light and drawn curtains which recalled to Hildred her first night at Whitecot, save that scuds of rain pattered at the window for admission instead of the scents and sounds of an April dusk, Mrs. Ivors suddenly shook off her lounging position, sat up straight in her chair, and threw her cigarette into the fire.

Hildred looked across in some astonishment. Silence had fallen between them, and the girl's fingers had been busy with a strip of Venetian needle-point which had been long doing with its infinitesimal fairy stitches, while her thoughts fled far afield to the future and its strange hidden possibilities, soaring, adventuring,

retreating, till with a shock Mrs. Ivors' action recalled her vagrant fancies to the inactive present.

"Hildred, I want to speak to you."

"Yes."

"I think it is only fair to tell you something of my married life before you leave me. I hate to talk of the past. It's behind me. I've put it behind me, and I don't want to be reminded of it, nor to raise its ghosts."

Hildred's calm was effectually shaken by her mother's stiff agitation.

"Please don't tell me anything if you'd rather not."

"I'd much rather not, but that's not the question. It's a question of right or wrong. It's a question of fairness or unfairness towards yourself. In all justice and honesty it is only right that you should know, as far as I can tell you, why your father and I parted. 'Those whom God hath joined together——'" She gave a bitter laugh.

The sound choked Hildred. "Please don't," she murmured, but Mrs. Ivors stared into the fire unheeding. Then she spoke as if she were reading from a book long closed.

"Our marriage was the usual one of propinquity and physical attraction. We met at the Derings, our mutual cousins. That was in their palmy days, before they lost their money. After the fall of their leaves," she continued with a grim humour, "we paid them back by giving them you to look after."

In a wave of indignation Hildred felt that the tone implied revenge rather than reward.

"They were always good to me," she cried.

"No doubt, no doubt. They were well paid for it."

After a pause she went on : " Your father was remarkably handsome. I was considered bright and quite pretty. I was twenty-five and ready to be pleased at his attentions. He—had no one else to distract him, and was probably attracted by my decision of character—a quality in which he himself was sadly deficient. I thought him a demi-god after a little. It's far better to look at a man through the wrong end of the opera-glasses first, for then you'll be surprised if he comes up to the normal height. Ingram didn't. He either soared far above it—in his own estimation, or fell far below it—in mine."

This was a new woman whom Hildred had never seen before ; a woman far removed from the careless, energetic player of games ; a woman who had suffered, and who had bitterly resented the suffering, on whom ' gnarling sorrow ' had laid a heavy hand, a touch that blighted, but neither killed nor healed. She told her story with a certain bitter detachment, yet not so far removed from contact that the recital had lost its power to sting.

" We were poles apart. We had nothing in common. We didn't even speak the same language. When, just at first, he used to ask my advice, I found that it wasn't advice he wanted, but praise and agreement. He used to get quite angry if I didn't advise him to do exactly as he wished, or approve of everything he had done. Lots of people are like that. It's a common failing. In pictures, music, books and plays it was just the same. We hadn't a thought in common. I liked things one could understand, he raved about the intangible, the incomprehensible, the beautiful, which

I should often have translated as the silly, the meaningless and the hideous. I didn't understand his friends either, nor they me. He was popular in a certain set—in most sets really," she added, with a determination to be honest, "for he had a great personal charm when he chose to exert it. I was popular, too, among my own sort, until marriage disappointed me, and took all the zest and brightness out of my life."

"What did he—my father do?" asked Hildred, her voice fallen to a whisper. So far the indictment seemed to her to be directed against temperament rather than the essentials. She had not enough experience of life to realise that a sufficiency of temperamental similarity *is* one of the great essentials of a happy marriage.

"Nothing," answered Mrs. Ivors, accentuating the word ironically. "At least one could call it nothing, even if it meant everything. He neither lied, stole, swore nor drank, was not unfaithful to me, never laid a hand on me except in kindness, as they say, never really got into tempers, never openly neglected me. Sounds a model husband, doesn't he?"

Hildred listened, bewildered by the circling thoughts raised by her mother's terse cutting words—prominent amongst them being an impulse of sympathy towards the errant father whose temperament was at least comprehensible to her.

"Made quite a success of his painting, too—the handsome popular artist with the dull plain wife. He used to talk a lot of rot about environment. He never saw that he had taken me out of mine and provided me with a cage instead. He was selfish, utterly and

absolutely selfish. Well . . . what's the use of raking up old bitternesses? By the way, did Lady Waveney ever try and pump you on the subject?"

"The first day I met her she asked me if I had seen my father lately?"

"And what did you say?" Mrs. Ivors leaned forward, as if the apparently irrelevant question and answer were of intense interest to her.

"I said that I was going to spend the winter in Egypt with him."

"Good girl. You showed discretion. Laura's full of curiosity."

"Oh, no, I showed no discretion," said Hildred quickly. "I told her the only thing I knew, and I was not sure if you would have liked me to say anything at all on the subject. You must recollect that until now my knowledge of you both has been a perfect blank."

"Never mind what I'd have wished you to say," answered Mrs. Ivors, ignoring her last remark. "That doesn't matter. Truth is truth no matter who wants to drape it, or how they'd like it done. No, Ingram never beat me, but he used to say little sarcastic things that made me feel raging and helpless and gave me a sort of squirm inside; he used to look disapproval at me with his raised eyebrows. I could feel his disapproving eyes through the back of my head. He—but what's the use? . . . I suppose we should have jogged along as most couples do, only bumping into each other a little harder now and then, if—if something hadn't happened."

Mrs. Ivors stopped. Her face looked suddenly wild and white: a great fear was in her eyes. Hildred

held her breath. Her heart beat furiously. Tragedy seemed to spread a pall about the room.

"I had one great wish," Mrs. Ivors continued, in a voice absolutely empty of feeling, flat, dead, toneless. "I longed with all my heart for a son. After some years my wish seemed about to be fulfilled. Then you were born. I hated you. I cursed you in my disappointment. Still . . . a year later my—curses came home to roost. I bore my son. He—I can't. Afterwards your father got ill, chest, lungs. We had to winter in Egypt. The first year I left you behind and took—him. The second—there was an epidemic of plague—the doctor said it would be madness to take a child. Ingram insisted on my going out with him. When I was away he—you both—got diphtheria. He—died. He was dead when I came home. I never saw him again. I never saw Ingram again. I never saw you again till last April. . . . Say nothing. Make no comment. Never refer again to what I have told you. . . . I was hard, bitter, revengeful. I wanted to curse God and die. But I was too strong. Such as I live far beyond the allotted span. I may have been wrong, I don't know—sometimes I think so—but at the time it seemed impossible. . . . Some say that sorrow draws people together. That's a lie. It doesn't. It puts them miles apart. There's a lot of rot talked about things by people who know nothing."

Hildred sat mute, overcome with the shock of her mother's outburst. The personal note was struck first. She had known herself to be ignored, deserted, but to find that she had been hated, cursed, as well

. . . poor little, innocent scapegoat of another's desires. Her mother *was* hard, and bitter, and alienative of all sympathy. Yet, through her words rang the appeal of the love pent-up and expended upon the one frail blossom so soon to be plucked, the appeal of suffering, the bitter cry of a broken heart, the aching resentful pride that raised a barrier so high that none might cross it.

The silence grew intolerable. At first Hildred could have found no words, even if speech had not been forbidden ; then utterance became impossible.

At last the door was opened with a jerk and Katherine looked in, her white cap-strings falling over her shoulder.

"I thought you'd all gone to sleep you was so quiet," she said.

"We've been raising ghosts, Katherine," said Mrs. Ivors in a hard tone. "It's not exactly a lively process. I'm going to lay them now. Go away."

Katherine disappeared, and shut the door with a bang.

"We arranged things through lawyers. We decided the question of your future. The usual well-meaning busybodies of relations tried to arrange a meeting—a reconciliation. Another instance of the prating of know-nothings ! If I had seen Ingram I should certainly have tried to kill him." She spoke with a matter-of-fact decisiveness that heightened rather than lessened the horror of the words. "I looked on him as my son's murderer. He would never have died if I had been there."

"You——"

"Yes, I do know," cried Mrs. Ivors sharply. "I'd never have left him night or day, I'd have sucked the poison from his throat. How could hirelings do what I would have done to save my son? What would it have mattered if I died so that my son had his man's life?"

There was a tragic simplicity in the words, a sense as of motherhood thwarted and spent in vain. For her no one else in the world existed. All feeling was drained into that one cup of bitter regret. She could have cried with Hecuba:

"Hadst thou but fallen fighting, hadst thou known
Strong youth and love and all the majesty
Of godlike kings, then had we spoken of thee
As of one blessed . . . but now . . .
Poor little child!

He had been robbed of life with all its glorious possibilities, this man-child whom she had brought into the world, and the cruel theft tore from her also some of the essentials of her being and left her warped, wounded and spiritually deformed.

Hildred covered her eyes. She had no tears, her lids were hot and burning, but she impotently tried to shut out the sight of the soul which lay bare before her. She felt numb, helpless, half-pitying, half-condemning, with the hasty judgment of youth; longing to flee, yet chained by that compelling force, the voice of a naked self which one hears only in the rare moments of life. She had no personal gauge with which to measure the depths of such feelings, no personal balm to offer for such wounds, no responsive stirring in the waters of her own soul whose deeps were still untroubled; yet

the budding womanhood in her stretched out hands to the maimed womanhood in her mother. Because of that she understood a little : she touched the fringe of the suffering which enwrapped the other, and made of her a figure as moving in its single absorption as any in an old Greek drama.

After a little the voice which had rung but a moment since with the echo of an eternal sorrow spoke again : this time there was even a little thrill of satisfaction in its tone.

" I've cut myself adrift from the past. I've put it all behind me. I've built up a new life for myself. I have a place here that is full enough and interesting enough for me. Fortunately, I was always fond of games and outdoor life," she went on, unconscious of the tragic bathos of the words. " After all to be a sportsman in the best sense implies a good deal."

The sudden change of topic, the unexpected leap from emotion to commonplace was almost too much for Hildred. She could have laughed or cried hysterically. Instead she uncovered her eyes to see her mother, with her everyday mask well adjusted, looking at the dying embers of the fire as if she pondered no deeper question than whether it would be worth while to put on fresh coal or not. The woman of sorrows had vanished with the dead flames, but it was a sudden and disturbing withdrawal.

" Well, have you nothing to say ? " Mrs. Ivors asked, after a pause.

" You told me to say nothing," answered Hildred.

" Well, I tell you to speak now."

" All I have to say is that I am—sorry for you

and my father, but I think I am still sorrier for myself."

"The past is past," began Mrs. Ivors.

"The past is never past," cried Hildred, with a flash of intuition. Words she had once read raced across her mind. "The past can never die : what has been will be again, and the things a man has once suffered he must still endure !" "It's perfectly true. The past lives in you, and it lives in me, and in what you have done to me." She stopped, ashamed of her outburst when she had meant to hold herself in check.

"A cheerful theory, upon my soul," said Mrs. Ivors, rising. "I think we'd better go to bed."

PART II
THE FATHER



CHAPTER I

THE WISHING CAP

OUT of the dazed semi-consciousness which is the sea's one boon to her temporary victims Hildred dreamily recalled the circumstances of her departure from Burnaby.

Katherine had cried, yes, actually cried at her going. Great tears had rolled down her cheeks, as she gave the girl a quick, shamefaced embrace, and turned away, mute.

Mrs. Ivors had requested an occasional letter.

"You might write to me sometimes, and let me know your movements, and how you are getting along. No need to enthuse about the sunsets or the dirty Arabs, though. I don't appreciate local colour."

Arab Leberte had asked for news of the great world in which Hildred would presumably find herself. "Tell me about all the interesting people you are sure to meet," she begged. "What they looked like, what they wore, what they said and did, just to make me feel in touch with something *outside*."

A quick, firm grip and a low-voiced reminder that the laurels were growing again and that her friend was hers for ever and a day was Dr. Lisle's valediction. Hildred smiled as she thought of it, and of the parcel of books from her friend which she had found awaiting her on board the "Nubia" on her arrival.

For the first time she felt really aware of her surroundings. The horrible motion of the ship seemed to have ceased, and a faint desire to leave her cabin and see what the world of water looked like from the deck stirred her, but not so far as to induce present action. She was still content to lie there, conscious of that curious sense of detachment which assails most people on their first sea voyage, that sense as of permanent separation from the stable element which the venturing upon the unstable one induces. She turned on her side ; through the open porthole she could see that the sun danced upon the waters. It was good to feel better : it was good to see the sun : it was good to be alive. She smiled again.

" Ah, that's right," said a very charming voice. " You must be feeling better. I am so glad."

During the nightmare hours which were now happily over Hildred had been conscious of a kind beneficence, a sympathetic presence in her cabin, but she had been too ill to fit it with a personality or to take heed of feature or characteristic. At the warm, gentle words she looked towards the cabin door whence the voice proceeded, and saw fully for the first time the tall figure of her travelling companion, Miss Marlowe, who had apparently just returned from her bath.

There was something instantly attractive in the vision thrown out vividly against the background of the curtained door—the curve of long limbs hinted at through a wonderful pale blue dressing-gown embroidered in irises, white, lavender and purple, the two plaits of wavy black hair which framed a beautiful ivory-tinted face and fell over her shoulders almost to the

knee, the black-lashed eyes which looked at the moment blue as the sea itself, but which might possibly change to grey or darken to hyacinth according to surroundings or moods, the full humorous mouth, the firm chin, mitigated by its fascinating dimple. The face fell far below the requisite canons of beauty, the nose was too short, the chin too square, the mouth too big, the eyebrows too straight—but to Hildred it was the loveliest face she had ever seen, and she promptly fell in love with it. A curious inflection in the soft voice went straight to her heart, an inflection that was not exactly cooing, caressing or coaxing, but a little mixture of all three, a soft rising and falling of the melodious voice which was unfamiliar yet not unknown to Hildred, and which she could not as yet place, but which fascinated her as it fascinated most other people who came into close contact with Hesper Marlowe.

"Do you feel well enough to get up?" asked the coaxing voice. "It would do you all the good in the world if you could see the sun sparkling on the water, and feel the sea-breezes on your face."

"I am sure it would," Hildred answered, sitting up. "You have been very good to me. I don't think I ever even thanked you."

"Indeed you did, and even if you didn't, what thanks did I want? You were very bad, you poor child. I felt dreadfully sorry for you." Miss Marlowe's voice lingered a little on the "dreadfully," elongating the first vowel sound in a way that brought swift recognition to Hildred's mind.

"Now, I know!" she cried without thinking. "You're Irish!"

"Of course I am! What else would I be?" asked Miss Marlowe, with a twinkle of amusement peeping, elf-like, through her thick lashes.

Hildred's ready flush raced across her pale cheeks. "I'm sorry if I'm rude," she said, "but your voice puzzled me till I remembered an Irish girl who was at school with me, and then I knew."

"The cloven hoof, or the uncloven brogue," laughed Miss Marlowe. Her laugh was melting, like her voice, a heart-whole infectious ripple.

"I believe I have some relations in Ireland myself," Hildred went on, half-shyly.

"Of course you have. I've never yet met an English person who was not proud to claim the remotest relationship with an Irish person. Why, there are some who would claim kinship on the strength of their great-grandmother's once having owned an Irish terrier!"

Hildred laughed, but her English blood forbade agreement with the absurd statement. She lay back on her pillows again, feeling suddenly tired.

"Ah, you're weak still, you poor child," said Miss Marlowe. "I'll send you in some breakfast, and then you'll feel better."

"Thank you very much," the girl answered, looking rather wistfully at Miss Marlowe as she deftly pinned up the masses of her black hair.

There was something touching to the other woman in the young forlorn regard, and when she had given a final brushing to the heavy waves that framed her forehead, and pulled a curve into a more becoming line, she turned to answer the appeal.

"Grandmother, grandmother, what big eyes you have!" she said. "What are you wondering now?"

"I am wondering how it is that you should be—mothering me"—Hildred choked a little on the word, and Hesper, all sympathy, visioned the greatest loss a young girl can know. "While a person I know, who must be years older than you are, looks upon me as a contemporary."

The odd answer tickled Miss Marlowe's sense of humour.

"Perhaps your friend doesn't know much about young girls. I do. I have been in intimate touch with a whole generation of them."

"A generation! Oh, nonsense——" Hildred began, and stopped abruptly, flushing.

"Don't you call ten years a generation of girls? I taught girls music for ten years. That removes any feeling of equality, externally, at any rate."

"Ten years?" Hildred echoed. The woman before her looked too young, too buoyant to have had her springtime crushed beneath the wheels of routine.

Miss Marlowe nodded, still with the elfin twinkle.

"From twenty to thirty I taught 'The Harmonious Blacksmith' until he was pounded to death by his own variations. I progressed——" her voice put a delicately scornful question mark after the word—"from Beethoven to MacDowell and the moderns. Then Fortune sent me a Wishing Cap, and I've been wearing it with delight for the past three years." She smiled with pleasure at Hildred's incredulous brows. "Yes, I'm thirty-three, nearly thirty-four. Thank goodness, I don't think I look it! I'm suffering from a disease,

though, which I'm afraid is incurable." Her face grew suddenly grave and she veiled her eyes with quickly-dropped lashes.

Hildred's glance sobered in response, but though she felt a pang she had yet a little chill of distaste at the unsought and to her apparently unnecessary confidence.

Miss Marlowe lowered her voice. "My complaint is this: that in spirit I am at *least* ten years younger than my real age! I've tried to cure it, but in vain."

Hildred laughed in her relief. "Oh, don't!" she cried. "You're so much nicer as you are."

"You're an odd child," Miss Marlowe returned, with another change of mood. "Don't imagine that I talk to people like this as a rule, for I don't. But there's something about you—a sort of drawing quality—ah, I can't explain, I'm not going to try. I'll send my maid in with some breakfast."

"Please don't bother. The stewardess will look after me."

"It will be an act of Christian charity to give Nanno something to do," said Miss Marlowe, with her disarming air of candour. "I, personally, have no use for a maid, but irresponsible people who have Wishing Caps and travel round the world must weight themselves with at least one of the appendages of respectability, so as Nanno is the least clogging and the most congenial I know I attached her to me. Besides," continued Miss Marlowe, smiling so that a dimple near the corner of her mouth peeped forth to keep the chin-dimple company, "she's not really a bit respectable either! In her own way she is just as mad as I am. All *really* nice people are a little mad, you know!"

With this astounding statement she left the cabin, after adjuring Hildred to eat every morsel she sent in to her, leaving the girl stirred, roused, revived.

It was as if a breeze off the waves, which wash away "all the woes of men" had swept through the cabin, bringing with it a tingling caress from

"The great sweet mother,
Mother and lover of men, the sea,"

which left behind as its benediction healing and a sense of quickened life.

Hildred could not as yet think with calmness of the mother who had cursed her in her bearing. Her pulses throbbed at the remembrance of the words. Melodramatic as they had sounded there had been none of the mock grandiosity of melodrama in their cold poignance. Still the two days' anodyne of the sea had already dulled the sharpest shock of the pain inflicted by Mrs. Ivors' disclosure, and with that zest of recovery which is one of youth's best boons, she determined to lock its memory into an inner room and hide the key in a secret place.

She would keep a seal upon her lips, a check upon her tongue; she would take thankfully any gifts that each new day might proffer, or bear with equanimity any lawful burden it might inflict. Her spirit rose to adventure's far-off echo.

It was strange how completely the two Dering cousins, whose hands had once held the unfilled cup of her young life, had receded to a colourless background, blotted almost out of recollection by the more vivid personalities she had recently encountered.

When Miss Marlowe's Nanno arrived with a tempting

breakfast, and proved to be an elderly brown-faced Irishwoman with eyes as bright as a bird's, a Katherine with her mental angles long since rounded into mellowness and her physical ones softened into curves, Hildred felt a sense of protection and well-being which she had lacked since the beginning of her voyage.

To find a deck-chair environed with cushions and rugs awaiting her when she crawled up to the blue freshness of day came as another pleasant surprise. Miss Marlowe was reading when Nanno convoyed her pale young derelict to these comfortable moorings. She smiled and nodded a welcome, but gave the girl time to rest and take stock of her surroundings before she attempted conversation.

Afterwards Hildred discovered that this was another of Miss Marlowe's charms ; she knew when to be silent.

In spite of what she had said it came with more than a tinge of surprise to the girl to find that Miss Marlowe on deck was an entirely different person from Miss Marlowe in her cabin. The upper air seemed to freeze her warm candour into a somewhat princely aloofness. She was charming to all, but friendly to none save Hildred. She had a keen eye for a sycophant, and the rich, as rich, did not interest her, unless they were interesting in themselves—"which," as she once said to Hildred, "seldom is the case."

"I believe I should find more congenial people in the second saloon," she said another day, "but it's so stuffy, and my Wishing Cap allows me to travel first, a luxury of which I haven't yet tired. Travelling third, with all that it implies, is a splendid preparation for the enjoyment of riches."

"I suppose so. I've never travelled third."

"It's an education."

"But an unpleasant one."

"Not necessarily. Besides, education always involves discipline. It's only afterwards that we learn to kiss the rod."

"Must we?" asked Hildred wistfully.

"We must, if we're to make anything of this glorious jumble called life," returned Miss Marlowe with decision. "Look at that fantastic coast-line, with its peaks and pinnacles."

Hildred looked. It was afternoon, and the day had been mild and calm. The rugged hills cut jaggedly into a pale sky: small brown villages nestled at their feet, and a white-sailed boat here and there tilted like a butterfly's wing across the blue-grey sea. On the highest, wildest peak stood a monastery which looked as if it had been carved out of the pinnacle on which it rested. Suddenly across the water came the faint, far sound of a bell, evoking the vision of cowled figures at prayer in a dim church in that remote fastness. The stable element and the unstable were swiftly connected by one of the world's great links.

A silence fell, and Hildred's thoughts fled back to that May morning in the wood when she had heard the first echo of the bluebells' chime, and the later magic hour.

Miss Marlowe's flitted among her memories, perching on none.

"That's Portugal," she said at last. "I mean to go there some day."

After that they had many talks, and a friendship

compatible with the gulf of years that stretched between them sprang into being. Hildred's feeling was tintured with that shy adoration which some girls feel for an older woman who showed sympathy without curiosity and comprehension without exaction. Miss Marlowe felt curiously attracted by the girl and appreciated the delicate reserve in which she veiled herself.

They bought together little green twisted baskets of fruit at Gibraltar and great branches of flaming poinsettia ; they watched the tinkling ayahs and swarthy Lascars bargaining for oranges, and the many-coloured boats which clustered round the ship like wasps about a pear, sucking honey of silver from its bored passengers.

They steamed on a blue dancing day into port at Marseilles, where the gold cross glittered on the domed roof of the Cathedral, while the wide semicircle of the bay curved away to red-roofed villas and a blur of welcome green, and over all the uplifted Notre Dame de la Garde watched beneficently.

Together they weathered the disagreeabilities of a *mistral*, and saw a distant waterspout show like a curved black ribbon from sky to sea with a cloud of whirling spray at its base ; together they watched for the first sight of Africa hours before they could have even glimpsed the land.

Incidentally Hildred learned many things about her own race and Miss Marlowe's.

She learned, for instance, that between England and Ireland is a great gulf fixed, a gulf of temperament, character and characteristic, that Irish people always speak of English people as "the English," and that

although they may understand one another up to a certain point sooner or later one or other comes up against a high blank wall of noncomprehension ; she learned that " the English " are more sentimental, less reticent, more prone to give confidences to strangers than the Irish, that their boasted reserve is no more than self-consciousness and conceit, and is as easily pricked as a bubble ; that they are insular and ignorant (of all things Irish !), dull as oxen, tenacious as bulldogs, unscrupulous where the annexation of land is concerned, whether in terms of counties or countries, or even acres. In fact the poor English had every one of their vaunted qualities plucked remorselessly from them until they stood bare and shivering beneath the lash of Miss Marlowe's scorn.

In vain Hildred tried to fly the Union Jack, and reclothe John Bull ; Miss Marlowe had a sweeping way with her which would brook no obstacle. She metaphorically stamped on John's low felt hat until a self-respecting scarecrow would have been ashamed to wear it.

Then she completely took the wind out of Hildred's sails of protest by concluding, with her soft picturesque italicism :

" Of course I'm not talking of the English as *individuals*. As *individuals* I consider them perfectly delightful. My best friends are English."

" Of what have you been talking then ? " asked Hildred, agasp at such a whirling reversal.

" Of the English as a *nation*, of course," returned Miss Marlowe, with the most melodious inflection. " As a nation they are detestable, abominable,

altogether impossible—ugh ! But as individuals, charming.”

Hildred was half-vexed, half-amused. “ But a nation is composed of individuals,” she protested.

“ Not a bit of it, my dear, any more than a crowd is composed of human beings.”

“ What else—— ? ”

“ Oh, it’s too hot for explanations,” said Miss Marlowe, tucking her arm through the girl’s.

“ Fancy finding it too hot for anything in December ! Come, let’s go look for Africa ! ”

CHAPTER II

THE KEYHOLE OF EGYPT

LIKE many another patriot Hildred reserved to herself the right of finding fault with her own country, and though her sense of justice told her that she echoed more than one of Miss Marlowe's indictments she nevertheless felt a faint prick of resentment at her candid criticism. If she had only realised that it was her mother in her whose national susceptibilities were being rubbed the wrong way she would have striven to cast the feeling from her ; but who shall undertake and disentangle even one of the intertwining threads of which the fabric of every life is spun ? Who can even dimly guess at the complexity of its spinning, of the different fibres which go to its final weaving ?

And yet, as Hildred leaned over the taffrail, her eyes searching the misty horizon for a glimpse of land, her arm touching that of Miss Marlowe, she felt a sudden waft of loneliness at the thought that she was so soon to lose this new friend, who had been to her more than the usual chance-found companion of travel. Was life for her to be made up of intervals of marching in the great procession, each time with a new set of comrades ? She seemed no sooner to have got in touch with one group than she was moved on to another. The

quiet inexorability of Fate caught and chilled her. She longed, or thought she longed for permanence, not realising that if she slipped into a groove, however wide, the youth in her, reinforced by her father's vagrant spirit would swiftly cry aloud for change.

"I feel excited at the very thought of Egypt," said Miss Marlowe's voice in her ear. "Don't you?"

"Yes," answered the girl, detaching her thoughts with an effort, and lifting her eyes from the lulling roll of the long burnished water-ripples as they melted from a silver brilliance to a hazy blue with dreamy reiteration.

"There is a fascination, an enchantment about its very name. That Mark Antony should have called Cleopatra his Royal Egypt always seems to me to sum up the magic of the country and of the woman in one word. Don't you think so?"

"I suppose so. Yes. I don't know."

Miss Marlowe turned to face her.

"You're dreaming, child. Or is anything the matter?"

"I don't think so. Yes, there is," said Hildred, with an impulse towards confidence. "I feel lonely at the thought of losing you, and a little nervous about meeting my father."

"Why? Is it long since you've seen him?"

"I haven't seen him since I was a child. I was at school, and then abroad, as I've told you, and spent my holidays with two old cousins."

"And he?"

"Oh, he was wandering," answered Hildred, retreating again into her shell. "He didn't want to be bothered with a schoolgirl on his travels,"

"I see." Miss Marlowe nodded in a wise way, which seemed to convey more comprehension than her actual words. "But now that you are grown up, polished, a finished product, he is eager to show you to his friends and to give you a good time."

"I suppose so," said Hildred quietly, but her lips curled into a dry little smile.

"As for losing me," Miss Marlowe continued, "I don't see why that should be at all necessary. We are bound to meet in Egypt, especially if you go up the river. Will you be doing that, do you think?"

"I don't know."

"I'm going as far as Assuan with the Nugents in their *dahabieh*. Sylvia and Gerda Nugent were both pupils of mine, and Lady Nugent has always been good to me. Sylvia is married now, but Roddy, the eldest son, has been ill, and they want to see what a winter on the Nile will do for him, so they've taken a *dahabieh* for the season, and have asked me to join them. It's a delightful chance for me, for it makes such a difference going with people one likes. I went to India with them two years ago. They are great travellers."

"They must be. How did you like India?"

"Immensely. I had a wonderful time there, but somehow I fancy that Egypt will fascinate me even more. Port Said, dirty little place that it is, was my first peephole into the East, and I have never forgotten it. The country draws me somehow. I can't explain exactly how or why. It seems to me to be naked, yet veiled, bare yet luxuriant, filled with sound and colour, yet empty of something essential, fierce—oh, what fantastic nonsense I'm talking!"

"No, you're not. Go on. I like it." Hildred touched her arm. "Ah, can that be Egypt?" She pointed to a blur upon the water. "No, it can't be. It doesn't even look like land. It's more like boats—a Noah's Ark just resting on the sea."

"Yes, it is. It is," cried Miss Marlowe. "Feel my absurd heart, how it's beating at the sight." She caught the girl's hand and pressed it for an instant against the warm softness above her heart which throbbed quickly and irregularly. "Yes, that's Egypt, or at least her postern, Port Said—that cluster of houses apparently floating upon the water. I can hear the voices of Egypt calling me already."

Her words came breathlessly, a tinge of pale rose, like the inside of a shell, touched the whiteness of her skin, and light like some inner flame shone through her eyes.

With a quick flash of memory and metaphor the vision sprang to Hildred's mind of the evening sun seen shining through the alabaster windows in San Miniato, turning for a magic moment their ivory pallor to a rosy translucence. Such susceptibility to beauty, to intangible influences, was another bond between them.

"The voices of Egypt," Miss Marlowe murmured, "subtle, insistent, irresistible. One should hear them soon with the ears of the body as well as with the spirit sense. The whisper of dome and murmur of minaret, the call of colour, life, movement, the magic of Egypt—oh, it's wonderful, wonderful!"

Her voice trailed into silence; she rested her face on her hands and gazed at the land they were nearing; bright houses looking like those of a new toy village

dotted down upon a strip of sand, a picturesque if ineffective huddle, topped beyond by greenish domes.

"So that's Egypt," said Hildred, with a vague sense of disappointment. After Miss Marlowe's rhapsody she had expected something more tangibly unusual.

The statue of De Lesseps loomed at the entrance of the Canal, growing in size as the great liner drew slowly nearer.

"Yes, that's Egypt," answered Miss Marlowe in a tone of dreamy satisfaction, as chin on hand she gazed towards the distant blue-green domes. "Even over the prose of coaling she throws a corner of her magic veil. We stopped here one night to coal on our way to India. I wonder if I could make you see what I see."

"Try," said Hildred, anxious to hear anything that would help to restore the glamour to her old Eastern visions.

Miss Marlowe's eyes looked far away: her voice rose and fell melodiously. For a moment the brilliant sunlight was obscured for Hildred, blotted out by the blue dusk evoked by the flowing words—a sudden darkness illuminated by a silver slip of moon which revealed a wonderland of glimmering lights, pale radiances and velvet-black shadows, while a forest of slanting masts of Nile-boats bent like a swathe of dry rushes against a faint, yellow horizon.

"Large flat barges full of dusky shapes were moored against the ship's side," the seductive voice went on. "Great flares of red light glowed sullenly, and sent up clouds of dun smoke towards the clear sky. Now and again a dim form beat upon a brazier, and the

sparks flew out revealing a line of shadowy figures bending beneath their loads, like grim shades from some remote under-world. Strange cries broke upon the stillness, weird songs of three notes swelled out and died away; hoarse calls issued from the haze, and through it all flitted the shades in a kind of ordered disorder. The moon rose higher and shone on those greeny domes and the pillared arches underneath, on that flat-topped city of twinkling lights, on the darting boats whose lanterns shed flakes of orange flame on the dark water; until at last the flares died out one by one; the barges were once more crowded with their freight of lost souls, who slowly ferried themselves and their Charons back to the darkness from whence they had come, to the burden of their own monotonous chanting."

Her voice sank, and Hildred, spellbound, saw that there were tears in her eyes. Then she tilted her chin in a way that Hildred was beginning to know, and continued in a lighter tone:

"And the next day every one said how dirty it was, and what a bore the coaling had been! Look up, child, and greet De Lesseps, to whom this wonderful canal is due."

From that moment the colour and movement on shore engrossed Hildred as the ship steamed slowly to her mooring-place opposite the arched and pillared building with its three blue-green domes, surmounted by the sign of the crescent.

The varied shipping, the flat-topped, brightly-coloured houses, the gaily-painted boats with striped awnings at the steps on shore made a fit setting for the

crowd of blue-robed Arabs, negroes, and donkey-boys running alongside donkeys jingling with chains and gay with scarlet and white saddle-cloths and red-humped native saddles, who, alongshore, accompanied the liner's slow progress, shouting, calling, laughing, in a shrill indistinguishable babel of sound.

It was interesting, amusing, if slightly bewildering.

When farewells had been said and mails distributed, when the liner stopped almost imperceptibly and was boarded by a horde of white-robed importunate Arabs, who settled like locusts upon the luggage of the unresisting passengers, a tall stout man in flannels and a Panama hat clove through the surge of humanity with an air of authority, and demanded to see Miss Ivors.

Puzzled, piqued with a curiosity which was yet tinged with nervousness, Hildred stepped forward. Could it possibly be her father? She had not expected to see him until she arrived in Cairo.

She decided as she glanced upwards that it was not he—he could not have grown so big and brown.

“I am Miss Ivors,” she said. The big man held out his hand.

“My name is Carteret,” he replied. “Your father asked me to have an eye to you and see you through the customs here. I’m Chief Inspector, so it will be very difficult to square me.”

“Fortunately I have no need to try,” said Hildred, with her quick appealing blush. “I have nothing to declare.”

“No tobacco?” suggested Mr. Carteret, who seemed fond of a joke.

"I haven't learned how to smoke yet. Here are my keys."

"Put them back in that nice little grey bag of yours, and let me take you to my place for a cup of tea. My wife is expecting you."

"The lady I am travelling with——" began Hildred, looking round for Miss Marlowe.

"I hope she will come too. You will have time for tea, and a look round before the evening train goes. Your ship's late."

"Is she? Something broke down once, I believe, and that delayed her."

"You didn't mind, I dare say. Found plenty to amuse you on board."

"Yes," answered Hildred. "Ah, here is Miss Marlowe." She made the necessary introduction. "Mrs. Carteret has invited us to have tea with her."

"How delightful!" said Miss Marlowe, drawing on her white gloves. "Tea on shore sounds quite entrancing."

"If you will point me out your luggage, I'll see it through, and have it at the station for you with no further trouble."

"Have we rubbed a magic ring and evoked a beneficent genie?" asked Miss Marlowe, dimpling.

"The genie in this case is genius," returned Carteret. "I am a great admirer of Ingram Ivors and all his works, and he has given me a pleasure as well as a privilege in permitting me to be of some use to his daughter as well as to yourself, Miss Marlowe."

"Is it possible," cried Miss Marlowe, "that you are Irish too?"

"Is it possible, my dear young lady, that I could be anything else?"

This animated colloquy brought the party to the gangway, at whose foot Mr. Carteret's boat waited, scarlet-cushioned, and with liveried rowers. They embarked on a wave of obsequious speeding, more important in their departure than they had been on their arrival.

Hildred felt a little thrill of pride at the realisation that here her father was a personage who counted. His fame had never touched her before; it was semi-local. His vogue was greater in Egypt than in England, for whose praise or blame he professed not to care, and whose climate affected him far more intimately than either.

Mrs. Carteret's hospitality sped another pleasant hour or two.

The noise and unfamiliar clamour in the street drew the travellers to the window.

"Would you not like to come out on the balcony?" asked Mrs. Carteret. "It must all be so novel to you, Miss Ivors. When I came out here first I could not keep away, but now——" She shrugged her shoulders.

"You are used to it," said Hildred.

"Yes, and it means parting from the children," answered Mrs. Carteret, with a sudden sigh. "It's all right when they are little. One can have them here then, but when they grow bigger they must go to school, and it's—it's rather a wrench." She pulled a chair forward for the girl, but Hildred leaned on the balcony rail, looking down at the gay, bustling scene in the street beneath her.

Mingling with the Europeans were black-veiled Arab women, with gold horns down their noses, native policemen standing in the middle of the street, white-robed men driving camels, yelling donkey-boys and peddlers shouting their wares. Here a negro boy in dull yellow carried on his head a flat basket of oranges, ripe amid their own fresh leaves ; there a hawk-eyed brown-faced man in soft blue rags balanced on one hand a basket edged with spikes on which hung rings of bread, large and small ; here came a lad in green with a wicker tray of red mullet, while there another in a dull pink robe sold dates—great reddish-purple clusters on saffron stems. Over all, permeating all, beating and ascending through the quivering heat-rays, was the warm, dry, pungent smell of the East.

In the cooler room behind Miss Marlowe was eagerly examining her host's collection of scarabs and mummy-beads. It was their colour which chiefly appealed to her—the wonderful blue, which is like no other blue in the world, the softened greens, the dull rich browns. Colour and mystery, mystery and colour—how they were interwoven, she thought, as she turned a deep azure scarab in her palm.

"I have never seen any of Mr. Ivors' paintings," she said softly. "Are they good?"

"I think them excellent," replied the man, enthusiastically. "Of course I'm no judge, but those who are agree with me. You must see his pictures if you are interested in Egypt. He catches a certain phase—not that sort," he waved his hand towards the street—"not the market-place and the set pieces—but the more elusive phases of Egypt—he does those

as no one else can. I can't afford to buy them, but I assure you that if I only had the money there are certain pictures signed 'Ego' that I'd rather have on my walls than any Turner or Titian that ever was painted!"

"Ego?" Her brows queried delicately.

"That's what he signs himself. Ingram Ivors—I. I." 'It's flinging myself at them however I do it,' he said long ago, 'so I'll sign myself "Ego" pure and simple.' So he did, and so he's done ever since. His daughter's a little like him, but not so good-looking. She's more like her mother, except for her colouring."

"Did you know her mother? She never speaks of her."

"Ah, she couldn't remember her," said Carteret. "Why, she must have been only a child when it happened."

"When what happened? Forgive my curiosity, but I am really interested in the girl."

"Oh, there's no mystery as far as I know—only a tragedy. Poor Ivors lost both wife and son at the same time—diphtheria. It must be fifteen or sixteen years ago. How time flies! He was out here for his health, he and his wife, and they got a cable to say that the children were ill. She went off at once. I saw her when she was going back. Like a woman of stone she was. He went later. He came out again next winter looking like death and told me he had lost both son and wife. I suppose she caught the diphtheria from the children. This little girl was brought up by cousins, he told me the other day, when he asked me to look after her,"

"Yes, so she said," answered Miss Marlowe. "Thanks for telling me. I understand things better now."

"I often wonder why he didn't marry again. An attractive fellow, and making pots of money. Just the sort of chap that women adore."

"Now you've rather prejudiced me," said Miss Marlowe, disappointedly. "The sort of man whom women adore doesn't appeal to me at all."

"I don't mean—I mean that—well, I'm really not quite sure what I *do* mean," said Carteret with a big laugh. "But anyhow, Ivors is a decent chap, in spite of his artistic temperament, which often rather puzzles a plain fellow like myself. I'd be sorry if anything I blunderingly said prejudiced you against him."

"Perhaps we shall not meet. Miss Ivors and I part company in Cairo and we are not very likely to see much of one another, as I am going with friends on to Assuan, and she will be with her father, wherever he is."

"That will not be Cairo for long, I fancy. The river's more in his line. He'll probably camp out at Luxor or some Nile haunt of his. Wherever he may intend to go he says he always has to get back to the Nile after a bit. Poor chap, he said once that he'd like to die by the river some day."

"That sounds rather morbid. Is he ill?"

"Oh, no. Chest delicate, I believe, but he always seems quite fit and full of life whenever I see him."

"He has one good friend at any rate," remarked Miss Marlowe, with a smile.

"He has scores of them, for the matter of that," said Carteret, exaggerating in his enthusiasm.

Later, as he walked with Hildred up the platform while his wife and Miss Marlowe went on ahead, he turned to the girl.

"Do you know that you remind me a little of your mother, Miss Ivors?"

Hildred was oddly startled. She had not expected to find remembrance of her mother here.

"Really? Did you know her?" she found words for no more. She shrank from question or comment.

"I met her here on her way home—that last time," he answered in a low voice.

"Oh."

He noted her shrinking and thought what a sensitive little creature she was, so pursued the subject no further. He had not imagined that the memory of such a long-ago loss could still be unapproachable with so young a girl; yet it might only be the natural withdrawal of youth from tragedy or the shadowed deeps of life.

Hildred more than half expected an enquiry, the usual query or careless hope that her mother was well. Mr. Carteret's tone had been odd, the hushed quiet voice of one who speaks of the dead rather than of the living. Perhaps he was a person who appreciated the tragedy of life—so much more poignant than the tragedy of death which sometimes holds more of solution than sorrow. Yet she had not thought him so subtle. He was a friend of her father's; he knew the circumstances, perhaps he felt bitterly towards her mother. Here was the clue to the riddle.

It was a relief to enter the train, to put aside complexities for the moment, to face quietly the nearest,

most imminent fact of her future—the meeting with her father.

It was Miss Marlowe who gave charming thanks and kindly valedictions, who waved gay farewells which held a hint of future meetings. Hildred only echoed her gratitude, and smiled her thanks to the Carterets as the train rumbled out of the station. She felt suddenly and oddly tired. The heat, the bustle, the novelty of sights and sounds, and last but supremest factor, the thought of the approaching encounter, wrought upon her nerves and, in the reaction of the new motion, wearied her now that she had time for realisation.

* * * * *

“ Quiet little thing, that girl of Ivors’,” said Carteret to his wife. “ Not much to say for herself, like her poor mother.”

“ I thought her a very nice girl,” returned Mrs. Carteret. “ She looked at me so wistfully when I was talking about the children.”

“ The other woman is a beautiful creature.”

“ Yes, for those who admire that black and white style.”

“ My dear Nell, you talk as if she were an etching.”

Mrs. Carteret smiled. “ Oh, no. She’s a woman, and an unsatisfied one at that.”

“ How on earth do you know ? ”

“ I saw it in her eyes,” said Mrs. Carteret.

CHAPTER III

THE PAST CAN NEVER DIE

“**L**OOK at that clump of palms against the pink evening sky ! ” cried Miss Marlowe.

“ Yes,” said Hildred tonelessly.

Silence fell, and later on the night. The moon rose, and one traveller at least felt a sense of exhilaration in rushing through the desert by its light.

A train rushing through a desert ! Could anything be more incongruous ? No, Hesper Marlowe decided, not even an electric tramway to the Pyramids. A symbol of the ingenuity of man, puffing defiance at its victory over the immemorial sands, tarnishing the clarity of the sky with its smoky breath for the one puny instant of its passing.

Once out of the blue dusk came a camel with a dark-cloaked rider, led by a figure in white : once a stretch of water gleamed by the track, its surface covered with water-lilies which shone like blossoms of silver in the moonlight ; here and there loomed a cluster of flat-topped mud-huts, with a group of Arabs round a fire of leaping flames, seen for one vivid moment.

The name of Tel-el-Kebir on a station lamp-post provoked another piquant contrast between its smug modernity and the vision of blood and battle which it evoked.

Hesper Marlowe swam on a wave of enchantment.

But after a while the wave broke to reality at the silent assertion of loneliness and aloofness made by the figure at the other end of the carriage, shrunk in its corner, looking mutely out into the night.

Hesper longed to comfort but shrank from intrusion. She had spiritual antennæ, she sometimes felt, which could sense an atmosphere, or a change of atmosphere unnoted by the less subtle ; and she felt instinctively that Hildred Ivors was in need of the tangible comfort which a human personality alone could give at the moment. She was not in a mood receptive to influences of the spirit. Sympathy made visible was what she needed. Still, Hesper, protective of her own reticence, hesitated lest in touching she should hurt or even jar.

"It's only a prick to my pride if she snubs me, after all," she thought. "And I may lose an opportunity of helping her if I don't try."

Acting on her impulse she rose and went to Hildred's end of the carriage.

Sitting down opposite her, she plunged with warm abruptness.

"You're fretting, child. What is it? Don't tell me if you'd rather not, or unless you think I could help you." She stretched out her hand.

Hildred clasped it gratefully.

"That was just what I wanted," she said, with a catch in her breath—"the touch of a nice warm hand like yours. No, I'm not really fretting. I feel a little tired, and rather lonely, and distinctly nervous."

"Is it at the thought of seeing your father?"

Hildred nodded.

"Ah, don't be nervous about that. Sure, the poor man must be longing to see you. If you only heard the way Mr. Carteret was singing his praises this afternoon—saying how charming he was, and how beautiful his pictures were, and how much every one thought of them! But it's absurd for *me* to be telling you all this!"

"It's not. It's delightful," cried Hildred. "And you are good and kind—a true friend. Go on, I love your voice."

"And me brogue?" asked Miss Marlowe, exaggerating it.

"And your brogue, if you like to call it so," answered the girl, warmed, comforted, and ready to hear sweetest music in the soft Irish tones.

"Sure, 'tis flattering me, you are!" laughed Hesper Marlowe. Then with a sudden change of mood and voice—"Ah, child, I'd give the world itself if I were going to see my own father this night."

"Is he——?"

"Yes, he's dead. The only one in the world I had to love." She paused, then continued as though the words were forced from her. "Five years since I was left without one of my very own."

There was a repressed longing, an undercurrent of hunger in the simple words which more than accounted for that which Mrs. Carteret had read in her eyes.

"Have you no other relations?" queried Hildred softly.

"None nearer than cousins, and not dear at that. I had an aunt, near enough akin to be able to rob me of what I loved best. Yet, poor soul, I don't suppose

she counted it robbing. I suppose she thought she paid for what she had stolen. Paid?" She gave a little mirthless laugh, so dry and empty that it was not even an echo of the laughter Hildred knew.

"Tell me if it doesn't hurt you," said the girl, touched and interested, yet eager to keep at bay the thought of her own impending ordeal.

"Shall I? I believe it would do me good to speak after all these bitter years. It's not much of a story, as a story." She stopped as if she found speech difficult. Then she squeezed the hand she held, and went on, gaining fluency as the scroll of the past unrolled before her.

"If you don't know your father at all it will be difficult for you to understand what mine was to me. Until I was about seventeen we were all in all to one another. I was all he had, you see, for my mother died soon after I was born. That was why he called me Hesper, his evening star. Well—" her voice broke a little—"I shone, I twinkled for him as long as I could. He was very delicate, very dependent on those around him, always immersed in his books and studies. Then the crash came. All his money went at once, a bank failure and some bad investments: he was no man of business. We hadn't a penny left. That was where my aunt came in. She was his step-sister, years older than he was, and rich. She had reared him from the time he was a baby, and loved him with a sort of fierce jealousy that would have all or nothing. First she hated my mother, then she hated me for taking him from her. Now she came forward, offered him a home with her, promised to see that his life was still set in

pleasant places, said she would have me trained so that I could earn my own living. . . . I was good at music, so I chose that path. If you love music you will know something of the daily grind, the frequent torture it becomes when you teach it to stupid children week in—week out. I often think that those who really care for music should never teach it, but that's neither here nor there. . . . She kept him entirely to herself. Even in the holidays she would scarcely let me go near him. But he always loved me best. I know, I know he loved me best." It was an exceeding bitter cry, questioning even while it asserted.

"Of course he did," Hildred murmured.

"Then when I had been teaching for about eight years he—died. A year later she died also, and left me all her money; much, much more than any one had suspected. Oh, why had it not come sooner? Why——?" She stopped, drew rein on passionate speech and curbed her voice again. "For a whole year I could not bear to touch it. It seemed poison to me: it had bought and sold my youth. Then my health broke down, and on recovery I took a saner view. Call it common-sense or apathy, it doesn't matter. Nothing seemed to matter then. There was no use in letting all that money go to waste, so I took it. I tried to blot out bitter thoughts from it. I call it my Wishing Cap, because it transports me to all the places I've always wanted to see, and—I don't spend it *all* on myself," she ended simply.

Hildred could not know the many self-giving charities that the words implied, but the unexpected recital opened up a new vista of thought. Was tragedy hidden

under every calm exterior? Where she had visioned laughing valleys, orchard slopes and sun-swept heights, lo! a volcano, still smouldering.

Arab Leberte, her mother, and now this apparently light-hearted, irresponsible Hesper Marlowe!

Did she possess some hidden key with which to unlock confidence, she wondered, or was it only chance which had thrust her unexpectant into the inner chambers of these two women's lives? Of course her own trouble differed from theirs; it was triangular, inevitable, it touched her father, her mother and herself.

The train slackened. The lights of a city shone in orange sparks through the blue dusk. With a start she realised that she had come to another turning-point.

"Thank you for telling me this. It has helped," she said in low tones.

"Yes," answered Hesper Marlowe. "I think it always helps to find that our fellow-creatures are ordinary human beings just like ourselves, that they have the same flaws and feelings, the same pricks and balms. And you mustn't run away with the idea, child, that because of what I've said I don't love any one. Indeed, I do. There are always people to love, even if the little ivory shrine is empty."

"You, at any rate, have memories," Hildred murmured.

"Yes, thank God. I try to cherish the good ones, and root out the bad. One has often a lot of weeding to do," she added, with a sudden whimsical smile.

Hildred rose and tried to see herself in the mirror. "How do I look? Please don't think me vain, but

I want the first impression to be a good one." Her hands trembled a little as she adjusted her veil.

"I think it will."

The train stopped. The station seemed full of light and confusion after the monotonous rushing through the night.

Hildred stepped down to the platform in Miss Marlowe's wake, shrinking aside from the crowd of Arabs who poured out of the third-class carriages—a crowd so multi-coloured in its blue and white and black draperies, punctuated with the inevitable crimson of the fez, or *tarbûsh*, that in her quiet grey attire she looked like a moth who had alighted amid a cloud of butterflies. She scanned the kaleidoscopic bustling throng to see if she could detach any one who resembled in the least her faint recollection of her father.

"Sir George Nugent has come to meet me," said Hesper Marlowe in her ear, "but I won't leave you until——"

"Can this possibly be Hildred?" asked a voice at her other side.

With a quick apprehensive leap of heart and pulses, the girl turned to meet her father. There could be no mistake this time. Out of the past flashed that face, the disappointed lips which had ejaculated:

"She has not even a feature!"

He had grown incredibly younger, it appeared. The long intervening years, empty of wife or child had stolen neither his youth nor his air of debonair gaiety. In the flickering light there were no lines visible about the brown appealing eyes or the clear-cut, handsome mouth, and his wavy hair, apparently

untouched by autumn frost, added to his almost boyish appearance.

. To him the past came back in one instant's poignance. There were the eyes, clear and grey as rain, in which he had once sought to read and solve the great mystery of love—eyes which, in his last vision of them had flashed steel blades of hatred towards his heart. After the moment's vivid memory he saw in this quiet-looking girl the expected daughter ; the amalgam, as he suddenly realised, of not only his life and another's, but of the generations beyond, which had contributed to the complexity of his and her making ; a realisation which comes, when it *does* come to a parent, with a rare and disturbing force.

There was but a second's mutual reconnoitring before Hildred spoke.

" Yes, I am Hildred," she answered, turning round to thank Miss Marlowe, who had, however, slipped quietly away at the moment of encounter.

" If you will describe your boxes to me Moussa will look after them." Mr. Ivors indicated a tall young Arab in a dull lilac-coloured garment bound about the waist with a striped sash of yellow and gold, who, when he heard his name, salaamed to Hildred, and smiled, showing incredibly white teeth.

Hildred described them.

She had gained poise and self-control since the beginning of her new life, and her air and manner showed a quiet distinction which pleased her father. On a sudden the twisted humour of the situation appealed to the girl. Here was another meeting in another railway-station of another parent, who

had to ask his daughter if it were really she? It was the scene at Burnaby tricked out in altered dress, and brighter colours, with a dark-skinned henchman instead of the sandy Johnny; so far, neither real welcome nor any warmth of kinship. The light, the unfamiliar crowd, the dark faces, the multitudes of appraising eyes, the strangeness of the whole scene, and above all the relaxation of the long tension told on the girl. She craved for rest and quiet. The sudden thought of the rosebud room at Whitecot swam before her eyes with the longing allurements of the known. Swift unbidden tears sprang on her lashes when her father, slipping his hand through her arm, said in a tone of real kindness:

"Come along, little girl. You must be tired and hungry. When had you anything to eat?" He drew her through the throng, which seemed to melt aside at their approach.

Outside, the night was cool and blue, the sky a vast wonder lit by moon and stars. By the pavement an *arabiyeh*, a small victoria drawn by two long-tailed horses and driven by a coachman in red *tarbush* awaited them.

"Get in, Hildred. Moussa will follow with the luggage. You will be glad to get to bed. Is everything still going up and down?"

"Oh, no, I lost that feeling long ago, but I confess that I am a little tired."

"You'll have some supper when we get in and then you can go to bed. To-morrow you'll look out on a new world. Gad, what wouldn't I give to be seeing Egypt for the first time? And yet I don't

know. It doesn't cast its glamour over you quite at first. There's the heat and the noise and the dust and the mosquitoes. It's afterwards that your eyes are opened, or closed." He spoke half to himself.

"You would find a fellow enthusiast in Miss Marlowe, my travelling companion. Egypt enchants her, she says."

"Was that the woman who was talking to you when I came up?"

"Yes."

"She's beautiful." He said the phrase in a low hushed voice, as if it were a prayer. Perhaps it was, for him.

"Isn't she?" cried Hildred, warming to enthusiasm. "She is as charming and delightful as she is beautiful, and that's saying a good deal, for I think she is the loveliest person I have ever seen."

"I shouldn't go quite so far as that. She is certainly beautiful, but her face is full of irregularities."

"One doesn't want marble perfection in a human being."

Ivors looked at his daughter curiously for a moment. Here was no shy bread and butter miss, but a young woman with opinions, and no hesitation in expressing them, despite her surface impression of quietude.

There was a reminiscent decision in her tone. He sighed involuntarily as he answered:

"No. Marble perfection is cold, even in marble."

"What about the Nike of Samothrace?" queried Hildred, up in arms for her beloved Winged Victory.

Her father's eyes twinkled. Here was an opening for a buttoned foil.

"If my memory doesn't deceive me the Nike is fashioned of grey stone, more human and less chilling than the more perfect whiteness."

Hildred laughed. In the brilliant moonlight her father noted the fleeting apple-blossom flush.

"Of course you're right! How stupid of me! I had quite forgotten."

Ivors gave a sigh of relief. "You're not infallible then? Thank God."

"Why? Did you think I should dare to consider myself so?"

"Most young people do. It's one of the royal prerogatives of youth."

As the carriage rolled along through the quiet residential quarters of Cairo, Hildred got an impression of tree-shaded roads and large cream-coloured houses draped and festooned with creepers—an impression of space and dignity very restful to her tired senses.

Ivors said a few words in Arabic to the driver, and with a cracking of his whip he turned again towards the lights and bustle.

"Do you use many *pins*, Hildred?" her father asked suddenly.

The question would have seemed irrelevant had not the memory of that other meeting lingered so persistently with the girl. She traced the long-spun connection of the query by the light of her own reminiscence.

"No," she answered.

"Not even safety-pins?"

She saw in memory the end of one protruding from beneath a patent-leather belt, and shook her head, smiling in spite of herself.

"Not even safety-pins," she said.

"Thank God for that!" cried Ivors with apparently unnecessary emphasis, as the carriage drew up before a quiet-looking hotel with a pillared portico and red and white striped awnings.

CHAPTER IV

THE NILE-SONG FROM AFAR

HILDRED awoke next morning to the sound of an intermittent clink-clink, clink-clink, clink-clink, which had something typically Eastern in its metallic monotony.

She pushed aside the white enveloping mosquito-curtains, crept out of bed and peered through the green laths of the sun-shutters.

For the moment the shady street seemed empty of all but the acacia-trees, each standing in its hollow earthen well. Then she descried a little farther up two white-robed figures who shrugged, gesticulated, chattered, in an open doorway. At the near side an Arab had spread his prayer-shawl in the blot of shade cast by one of the trees, and removing his shoes, knelt, rose, bent and prostrated himself in the beautiful and varied attitudes of devotion. *Arabiye*hs rattled by unheeded, the clink-clink came nearer and resolved itself into a white-clad lemonade-seller, who clipped his brass cups together as he went, making a brilliant effect of colour with his scarlet shoes and sash and the twinkling radiance of his vessels of brass and glass. A string of camels laden with great bundles of vivid green clover ambled down the street gurgling and grunting; an old man drove a rickety donkey-cart

with a high open crate full of live pigeons ; a smart white motor-car glided by, adding a touch of incongruity to the scene, and still the Arab prayed on, isolated in an utter detachment of spirit from the world around him, visioning Mecca perhaps as his forehead touched the dim purples and reds of the shawl on the ground.

This first real glimpse of Cairo held Hildred enthralled. She stood there, barefoot, peeping through the green shutters until a tapping at the door and the sound of her father's voice asking if she were ready for breakfast brought her back again to a world of baths and meals. She answered hurriedly.

"Very well, I will send Moussa for you in twenty minutes," said her father, through the door, "which, being interpreted, means half-an-hour."

"No, it doesn't," returned Hildred promptly. "It means twenty minutes, and not a second more."

"How I'll crow if you take twenty-five," said her father boyishly.

"I shan't take twenty-five."

"Good God, how like her mother that sounded!" thought Ivors as he turned down the corridor. "The voice, the very intonation. Poor Harriet was *always* right."

So was Hildred upon this occasion, for she was dressed and ready to go down when she opened the door to Moussa's tap.

"Good-morning," she said.

"Good-morning, *ya Sitt*." His teeth flashed in the Arab's ready smile. He held a pink rose in his hand. "From the master," he said in laborious English.

Hildred took the flower and fastened it into her belt, flushing at her father's pretty attention as she followed Moussa along the corridor.

He threw open a door with a flourish, and announced her in Arabic.

The room was large and lofty. Two high, shaded windows opened on to a balcony. At one end her father sat at a round table, reading letters.

He looked up, and rose at her entry. Once more the question of greeting puzzled the girl, but only for a moment, as Ivors came forward and taking her hands lightly kissed her cheek. There was a pleasant acceptance of relationship in the action which contrasted cheerfully with her mother's arm's-length attitude. With a little sigh of relief she realised that for the present at least she might lay down her weapons of defence.

"Well, did I take longer than the twenty minutes?" she asked with a little air of triumph which radiated from her becomingly.

Ivors surveyed the dainty detail of her white attire with satisfaction.

"No," he returned. "I see you are wearing the prize for punctuality. I told Moussa not to give it to you unless you were ready. But don't do it too often."

"Do what?" she asked, puzzled.

"Don't be *too* often right, or rather don't put me too often in the wrong," he answered with a plaintive whimsicality which brought back to the girl one of her mother's indictments.

The easiness of his attitude puzzled Hildred. Both he and her mother accepted her as an instant fact in

their lives to be judged by present knowledge alone. Past thoughts, deeds, aspirations, environment seemed to be taken for granted and left utterly unprobed : it was, as Miss Marlowe had said, with the finished product that they were even temporarily concerned. What had gone to the making, the moulding, the shaping was apparently not to their interest, and the superficiality of such an attitude provoked the girl to a sort of wondering despidal. How could fifteen years be blotted out so utterly ?

Still, while the waters now seemed so smooth she would do nothing to provoke a storm. It would be pleasant to drift on in a sunny present while she might. Her presence in the big room produced an impression of personal domesticity in Ivors to which he had long been a stranger. It was pleasant to look up from his letters to see her sitting opposite, a quiet and, so far, unobtrusive personality of whom to invite comment or query when the mood prompted him.

Yes, his daughter was a surprise : her aplomb, her touch of distinction, her lack of schoolgirlishness or primness, and above all the unexpected attractiveness of her appearance charmed and pleased him.

" We shall not be long in Cairo," he said, holding up a letter. " The idea delights me, though the ancients say that

' He who hath not seen Cairo hath not seen the world.
Her soil is gold ;
Her Nile is a marvel ;
Her women are as the bright-eyed Houris of Paradise ;
Her houses are palaces, and her air is soft, with an odour
above aloes, refreshing the heart ;
And how should Cairo be otherwise when she is the mother
of the world ? ' "

"Her houses are palaces certainly," said Hildred.

"And her Nile is a marvel. Ah, Hildred, wait until the ears of your spirit are opened to hear the Song of the Nile."

"Miss Marlowe said that she could hear the voices of Egypt with her spirit sense."

"Miss Marlowe must be a woman of understanding. Yes, there was something rare about that moonlight face in its masses of night-black hair. Those who have ears to hear are generally permitted to hear. I should like to know if she will hear it too."

"Hear what?" asked Hildred, interested. She saw in the clearer light of day that faint lines were etched at the corners of her father's eyes and about his mouth, and that his fair abundant hair was slightly frosted. Still, the enthusiasm which irradiated his face enhanced his boyish look, and emphasised for the girl the great gulf of temperament which had separated him from her mother. The eternal and piteous conflict of temperament! She was dimly beginning to perceive its potentialities.

"The song of the Nile," answered Ivors. "The great keynote without which all the other voices of Egypt would be mute: the song of the gods, the song of fertility, the mighty song which in the lost centuries called life out of death and order out of chaos, evolving by the necessities it created, a fine civilisation from primitive beginnings."

"What does it say?" the girl queried softly.

"Ah, who can tell that? Have you ever seen through the mist of an opal a fire flashing that eludes and evades, that is and that is not, that is never the

same to any in flame or colour, living green to one, leaping blue to another, to a third red as the heart of light itself? So with the song of the Nile. I try to paint it, pah! Who could paint a mystery that is compact of colour, of sound, of sunlight and moonlight and starlight, of something that is none yet all—more definite than to-day, more evanescent than yesterday, more unattainable than to-morrow—ineffable, intangible? One might as well try to clip the wings of a dream or use a rainbow as one's paintbox. And yet, I suppose to an artist all things are paintable. I wonder! I wonder! I am always wondering. Life to me is a pageant of beauty and mystery with an enormous question-mark after each new thing."

He paced the room. Here spoke the dreamer, the pursuer of visions, the archer of mist-wraiths, whose eager questing feet trod in the footsteps of eternal youth.

"I should like to see some of your pictures."

He stopped, and turned with a frown.

"Now you've touched the bubble of my dreams and it is gone, the beautiful thing!" he said quite crossly, hearing the clank of the invisible chains which bound him to the stupid necessities of every day. "No, you wouldn't like my pictures. You wouldn't understand them. Half the people who buy them only do so because I happen to be the fashion. I despise them. I loathe them."

"Yet you sell them your dreams," said Hildred, pricked at his assumption of her ignorance.

Ivors looked at her with a regard compact of admiration and dislike.

"Your remark displays a pleasing lack of practicality," he said, "as well as a joy in finding a weak spot in my armour which is disagreeably reminiscent."

The girl reddened, feeling oddly stung.

"I don't want to find weak spots," she half whispered, looking down.

Ivors' brow cleared. "Oh, don't you? Well, that's a relief. It's worn very thin in places and you would have no difficulty in poking your little fingers through. You've pretty hands. I noticed them last night. They're shaped like mine, so you must have a dash of the artistic temperament in you."

Hildred looked up. "Oh, more than a dash—a splash."

"God pity you then, poor child," he said, with a sudden change of tone. "I can never make up my mind as to whether such a gift is not more curse than blessing. And yet—I wonder! . . . Well, what are you going to do with yourself to-day?"

The girl's mind fled back to the first morning at Whitecot. What a curious repetition of events in so different a setting! Here there was no garden, no Katherine, not even a dog. Was she to be left quite to her own resources in a strange land? She, too, wondered. Ivors studied her face, and awaited her answer with some curiosity. He was more experimentally inclined than her other parent, and if the proper study of mankind be man his curriculum had included a varied course of the subtler portion of the race.

"I shall unpack first," she answered, feeling more inclined to cry than to laugh, "and then I shall amuse

myself by sitting on the balcony and watching the people."

Ivors smiled. "Admirable decision! In your place half a hundred vaguenesses would have flitted through my mind, and I should not have known either what to do or what to say. I only want you to fill in time until the afternoon, when I shall take you for a drive."

Her face cleared. "That will be delightful."

"Moussa will bring you your lunch. Don't unpack too much, for we shall only be a day or two here. I've had an invitation for us both to go up the Nile——"

"Can it possibly be from the Nugents?" cried Hildred, with a flash of inspiration.

"Why? Do you know the Nugents?"

"No, no," said the girl eagerly, her quick blushes coming and going, "but Miss Marlowe was going to join them and I wondered if anything so delightful could possibly happen as that you should know them too."

"The unexpected," said Ivors sententiously, "is what always happens, of course. The invitation is from the Nugents, who happen to be very good friends of mine. We are to join them on Thursday. The Arabs say that is a lucky day and call it '*el-mubarak*,' the blessed. Sir George wants me to do two pictures for him—Nile pictures, of course. He wants them for a birthday present for his wife."

"When is her birthday?"

"I haven't the least idea. Besides it doesn't matter. It will be, like a royal birthday, whenever I choose to finish the pictures; that is, if pictures, like

anything else in life, ever can be finished. How do you like the notion ? ”

“ Which notion ? ”

“ Don’t be so literal. I mean the notion of going up the Nile, of course.”

“ There’s no ‘of course,’ ” Hildred retorted. “ You were just descanting on the subject of things in life never being finished. How was I to know that you had leaped back to the Nile trip again ? ”

Ivors laughed. His daughter was beginning to amuse him. “ You’ll have to get used to my grasshopper-like proclivities,” he said. “ Just watch how I jump and in a little while you’ll learn to know exactly where I alight.”

“ Shall I ? ” she returned dubiously. “ I doubt it.”

“ So do I,” said Ivors. “ Few people ever do.”

“ Do what ? ”

“ Know where I alight,” he answered. “ Well, I don’t much care so long as I land on a *dahabieh* on the Nile. It’s the perfection of motion, a *dahabieh* towed by a launch. You glide along as if it were a gondola. There is no throbbing, no jerking, no puffing.”

“ It sounds heavenly. And when it includes Miss Marlowe—oh, she *is* so nice ! ”

“ Nice is an odious, much mis-used young-ladylike word. Can’t you think of a better one ? It’s nearly as bad as sweet.” He went to a bookshelf and took down a dictionary. “ ‘ Nice—foolishly simple : over-particular : hard to please : marking or taking notice of very small differences : easily injured : fastidious.’ Do any of these terms apply to your friend ? ”

"She is rather fastidious, I think, but has the word no other meanings?"

"Well, the dictionary gives dainty, agreeable, delightful, as well," said Ivors, shutting and replacing the book.

"Won't they do? I think I shall stick to nice," answered Hildred. "It's comprehensive and she *is* really nice."

"Right again," groaned Ivors. "In spite of my warning, I prefer to think of your friend as a beautiful strand of ivory and ebony which Fate is weaving into our lives."

"You can't *weave* ivory and ebony," objected Hildred.

"Yes, you can, or rather Fate can, if I choose to say so."

"You had better compile a dictionary for yourself then," she retorted, exhilarated to the point of unusual buoyancy at the prospect before her.

His face changed, aged and whitened. Out of the past those innocent-sounding and now jesting words stabbed at him like a lance. Once, in white rage, his wife had flung them at him tauntingly. It had been their first quarrel and had owned a sharpness which the recurrence of similar scenes had blunted. Harsh words, loud voices jarred inexpressibly on him, hurt him like a blow. It had been a wounding revelation, never to be forgotten. Was it some vibration echoing through eternity which brought the words to his child's lips? He turned away.

Hildred sat wondering how she had offended. Perhaps her father did not like such freedom of speech.

Then she suddenly remembered what her mother had said that morning when Dr. Lisle had found her worshipping the Invisible in the visible almond-tree.

"In my early days I had much instruction in the nice discrimination of words, their selection, their meaning, their shades of meaning——"

Had she pierced through a hole in the armour unawares ?

"I am sorry," she faltered.

"'Tisn't you," he said, forcing a smile. "It's Fate, beating me with a stick of ivory and ebony made out of those strands to which you objected ! Take care of yourself, child. I'll call for you about three."

He came back and tapped her cheek ; then left her to her own devices for five long hours.

CHAPTER V

LIFE'S WHEEL

AS Hildred went to her room she came face to face with her father in the corridor. There was a touch of the picturesque in the brown tie which exactly matched his eyes, and the jaunty angle of his Panama hat, which he removed at sight of her. It struck her that he was the only man she had ever seen who could wear such headgear with any distinction. He owned just the requisite touch of debonair buoyancy for its assumption. He was distinctly a personable companion, this jaunty unknown father who was flitting off she knew not where, to meet she knew not whom, to return—yes, about three.

Only for the stirring of the blood-tie she would have been shaken by a passion of fear and loneliness. As it was she set herself to practise patience, Dr. Lisle's art, she thought with sudden warmth.

"I was just coming back," said Ivors, "to tell you that if you care to look at them there is a portfolio of my sketches in the lowest shelf of the bookcase. They are—well, some of the dreams I do not sell," he added in a lower tone.

"Thank you," she replied in the same key, "I will be very careful—of the olive branch."

He flashed a glance at her : then he smiled. It was a brilliant, humorous, whimsical smile which had won for him many friends and the condonation of many faults.

" Poor little dove ! It was good of you not to peck."

He kissed her cheek lightly and was gone, feeling that he had successfully arranged for the filling of her empty hours.

After Hildred's temporary unpacking she went back to her father's sitting-room.

The table was cleared and a great bowl of roses stood in its centre. She went to the bookcase for the portfolio and, laying it on the table, opened it with a feeling of pleasurable excitement, which faded a little as she took out sketch after sketch.

They were mere hints of cloud and light effects, shadows on desert sands, melting tones of colour in a patch of flowing water, exquisite in their dreamy *nuances* of pearl, pale rose and amethyst, silver, mist-grey and hyacinth, but vague, intangible as the song of which he had spoken. They were the nearest things to dreams made visible that Hildred had ever seen, but, like most dreams, they were too elusive, too indefinite to produce any effect more real than the echo of a whispered promise. In their lovely opaline mists of colour they reminded her of the Turner sketches but they were even less tangible than they.

One was an effect of sandstorm—a whirling, biscuit-coloured cloud of dust. As one gazed, the shadowy figure of a Bedouin on a camel seemed to emerge. Then

it faded, and one was not certain that one had ever seen it, that it was not a swirl of dun spray.

Another was a fragment of blue sky across which trailed a scarf of cloud tinged with glowing rose; another a stretch of peach-coloured sand with white splashes that looked like birds on it. These were the only three in which she could decipher any subject. The rest were faint effects of colour, as if he had captured the rainbow of which he had spoken, dipped it into moonlight to soften its brilliance and then used it as his palette, from which he evoked the dream-shapes which he called sketches.

She looked at them for a long time; then closed and replaced the portfolio, and went out on the balcony to see the throbbing colour of the living East.

There was something attractive about her father, though the sense of estrangement and the gulf of unconnected years yawned between them too deeply for the tentative frail bridges of either to span as yet: the fire of resentment still smouldered: through its smoke Hildred looked and tried to judge dispassionately. Her father's charm was more difficult to combat than her mother's hardness: yet in her desire for fairness she felt the impulses bequeathed by each struggling within her to the point of bewilderment. With a smile too bitter for her young lips she reflected that her mother had found her too dreamy and romantic, while to her father she appeared to be prosaically literal and unimaginative. Was she a negative then, produced by some whimsical inversion of Fate, by these two very distinct affirmatives?

A shrill piping and the throbbing of drums caught

her ear and diverted her from her introspection. She leaned farther over the balcony, whose scarlet and white awning shaded her pleasantly, and seemed to throw her English fairness into stronger relief.

Down a narrow side-street, which led to one of the native quarters, went an Arab procession of the poorer class. Here were no musicians on camels, red-tufted, and gorgeously trapped, jingling with adornments of beads and shells, but a few white-robed men on foot playing their squealing pipes and beating small fish-skin-covered drums with all the solemnity that befitted the occasion. Round them little children dressed in single garments of yellow, blue or pink, ran and capered : behind followed rickety carts bearing the household furniture ; on top of the first sat a veiled woman holding a mirror, evidently a precious possession, in her lap. Then came two *arabiyehs*, crowded with natives, and a closed carriage covered with an embroidered cloth, whose soft reds and yellows and blues and browns merged into a dull richness of colouring.

Hildred watched the odd procession with interest until the closed carriage, which contained the bride, had passed out of sight, and pipe-note and drum-tap merged into the mosaic of sounds which helped to create the Egyptian atmosphere. Kites screamed shrilly in the blue overhead, wheeled and circled in swift flight or stopped in sudden watchful pause : sparrows chirped and chattered busily in the roadway, bringing a touch of familiarity into the strangeness, until a watering-cart clattering down the street dispersed them for a moment, evoking a smell of wet dust as it went onwards towards the humming city.

Then by a curious coincidence Hildred came in touch with the last great fact of mortal life, Death. Far-off sounds of chanting pierced the air, and through the narrow street, which rejoicing feet had so lately trodden, passed now the steps of those who mourned.

First came grave, bearded, turbaned men, some of them blind, who chanted incessantly and monotonously on two murmuring notes the profession of their faith—" *Lâi-lâ-ha il lâ-l-lâh.*"

Hildred rose and listened breathlessly to the low, harsh voices as the slow-paced men wound into sight and out of it again, followed by little boys bearing green branches, who took up the chant in shriller, livelier strain when the men ceased for a moment.

Then came the bier, like a coffin on four poles, carried by friends, who changed places continually. It was draped with a richer covering than the bride's had been, and was hung with garlands of pink roses, while at its head was placed the dead man's *tarbûsh*, whose long black tassel hung limply from the crown. After the bier came the veiled women mourners, in thin fluttering robes of black or darkest indigo, each carrying a scarf of blue muslin which she twirled wildly about her head, her shoulders, or before her face, as she uttered the high thin cries of conventional grief. The wild gestures and wailing abandonment of the women contrasted oddly with the grave demeanour of the men, while their shrill cries, piercing as those of the kites overhead, the chanting of the boys, and the deeper tones of the now distant men resolved themselves into one of the strange, yet not altogether inharmonious, discords of the East.

Life and Death, the perpetual allies of Nature, each treading on the other's heels, each standing aside to offer precedence in turn, each taking, each giving eternal toll.

Death here, despite the shrilling mourners, owned a gayer, more joyful aspect than Death with its gloomy plumed accessories in England. The dead man had gone to the garden of Paradise, therefore his friends should rejoice, even though the conventions of mourning must be fulfilled. Hildred, like her father, began to wonder.

Then, when she grew weary of vain pondering, and the desire for action awoke, she got her writing-case and indited letters to her friends—long ones to the Dering cousins and Arab Leberte, which touched on the incidents and pleasures of the voyage and the happy prospect of the Nile trip, and a brief announcement of her arrival and general well-being to her mother. She felt more than a passing wish to send a word of greeting to Dr. Lisle; he was a person to whom she *could* write, she thought, but a certain constraining shyness held her hand, as she had already written to him from Marseilles. If she had only a picture-postcard! She had sent picture-postcards to her friends from all stopping-places. He would probably expect one from Cairo. But how to procure some? She did not like to go out alone, nor down into the lounge of the hotel among strangers. The forlorn sensation returned in full force.

She rang the bell, and in a moment Moussa appeared, white-robed and smiling.

"*Sitt* want lunch," he suggested. "*Aiwa*, yess, Moussa bring."

Deftly he spread a dainty little meal, deftly he served her, with ever-ready smile and watchful eyes.

At its conclusion she felt refreshed and invigorated. The desire for action grew. She wondered if she could make Moussa understand that she wanted to go out and buy postcards, but his English was extremely limited and her Arabic non-existent.

"Moussa, please," she ventured "I want picture-postcards."

"*Sitt* want bosta-card," answered Moussa with a delighted smile. "*Aiwa*, yess, Moussa bring."

He disappeared, and in a short time returned with a little sheaf of postcards which he presented to the girl.

Hildred took out her purse, but Moussa shook his head.

"No, no, I want no money," he said in Arabic.

The girl lifted bewildered eyebrows, and the youth's smile flashed out in response.

"Master give," he said. Then he looked round the room to see if anything further were needed, and uttered his best effort in English. "*Sitt* want, *sitt* ring, Moussa bring."

"*Aiwa*, yes," Hildred answered, determined to tackle Arabic on the earliest opportunity.

When he had gone she examined the postcards—a motley selection. One was a bare-breasted Nubian girl, another a naked child sitting on a water-buffalo, another a group of Arabs round a vegetable stall, and several highly-coloured representations of veiled and unveiled Eastern females. She selected one of the latter for Katherine and the natives clustering round

the crazy booth for Dr. Lisle, to whom she said—"So far I have not even seen a mango-seed in Egypt." To which he replied later that she must learn a new accomplishment, his latest being that of building cages for dreams, a handicraft, he said, in which his original art proved very helpful.

Meanwhile the minutes ticked slowly. Hildred was ready and waiting from three o'clock, but it was nearer to four when her father arrived, fresh and cheerful, and not at all apologetic.

"I suppose you had almost given me up," he said lightly. "I lunched with some very amusing people at the Semiramis, and afterwards we smoked and talked, and the hours simply fled."

"They snailed for me," answered Hildred ruefully.

"That's rather a good word," laughed Ivors, "although I fear that the dictionary would not sanction it. To snail—did you invent it yourself?"

"It was a school word," Hildred replied briefly. She felt a new and sudden exasperation at the sight of this cool, careless person, and yet the sense of companionship was so grateful after her lonely hours that she could not afford to risk its loss again. "Are we going out now?"

The slim, erect figure, gloved, and provokingly ready found another weak spot in Ivors' armour. How often in dead days had Harriet so sat and waited? The sight, so obviously putting him in the wrong, pricked him to a lazy disinclination for further movement.

"We'll have tea first, I think," he said, "then we

shall go out, and you shall plunge into the seething East."

"I should like to plunge into something. I am rather tired of sitting still."

"Why didn't you practise the can-can?" asked Ivors, with a twinkling nonchalance. "I am told it is admirable exercise."

"I don't know the can-can," Hildred began, but she had to laugh before she had half-finished her stiff little sentence.

"That's right," said Ivors. "An untold relief. I know that people cannot be really angry with me when I can make them laugh."

"Why did you think I was angry with you?"

"The way you sat, my dear, and your dreadful air of being ready. You were right too, of course. That was the worst of it. It was unconscionable of me to keep a lady waiting. I'll apologise willingly now that you've laughed, but while you looked so horribly right I couldn't. The words froze on my lips."

Hildred laughed again. What was the use of being annoyed with so irresponsible a person?

"I don't think anything could freeze to-day," she answered, with that touch of literalness which Ivors so deplored.

"Are you enjoying the sunshine?"

"Yes."

"Ah, tea, thank goodness. Will you make it, please, Hildred?"

"With pleasure."

She rose and went to the table. Ivors liked the way her hands busied themselves about the little task.

"Did you look at the sketches?" he asked suddenly.

Hildred glanced up and away again. "Yes."

"How did you like them?"

She met his enquiring gaze frankly.

"You were right," she said. "I did not understand them. They seemed to me to be very—vague."

"Dreams are vague as a rule," returned Ivors. Her frankness pleased him, but, despite his previous judgment, her lack of comprehension disappointed him faintly. He was one who quested always for the Crystal of Understanding.

After tea they set out. In the lounge Ivors stopped to speak to one or two people, to whom he introduced Hildred. There was a touch of pride in his tone as he said—"My daughter—" and the girl was pleased at his evident popularity.

One lady, a Mrs. Herries, said that they should dine at her table to-night, while her daughter made an engagement with Hildred to play tennis on the morrow.

With their descent from the shaded room they seemed to have plunged into a small whirl of life and gaiety, which promised no return of empty hours in the future.

As they drove through the tree-shaded streets with their ever-moving throng Hildred felt stirred and stimulated, and when they crossed the Kasr-el-Nil bridge and she got her first glimpse of the Nile with its palm-trees and palaces, its steamers all gaily a-flutter with flags, and a Nile-boat or two with high pointed sails she felt a real thrill of excitement, which a nearer view of the rushing, turbid river slightly abated.

Still it was strange and new—the crowd of varied colour and nationality, the natives walking calmly in the middle of the road amid the rush of traffic, the *harîm*-carriages with their white-veiled occupants : here a dust-coloured figure against a dust-coloured wall selling oranges, there a string of Arabs, in black, or white, and blue, hurrying along with flat baskets of glowing tomatoes poised upon their heads.

The vivid life, the unusual sounds and sights, the colour, the movement, enchained the girl to silence, and the last touch of strangeness was added to her impression when, after driving between the orange-trees at Ghezîreh, she saw the polo-ponies galloping across a field of grass, from which they sent up clouds of dust with their active hoofs. It was curious to her to see the game played against a background of palms and watched eagerly by groups of squatting Arabs, while a few hundred yards away flocks and herds grazed peacefully under the palm-trees, tended by shepherds with long staffs.

Ivors watched her with amusement.

“Have you heard the Nile-Song yet ? ” he enquired at last.

“I haven’t had a chance,” the girl answered. “Give me time.”

“It would take eternity,” said Ivors with a little sigh.

CHAPTER VI

THE LUCKY DAY

IT was Thursday, called by the Arabs "the blessed," and Lady Nugent and Hesper Marlowe sat on the deck of the *dahabieh* "Nitocris," which was tied up at El-Wasta to await the arrival of the Ivors.

The afternoon sun was still high, and bathed the river, the village, and the palm-groves in a golden glow. To the left the spurs of the Arabian hills rose sharply into the haze: down the river came a flotilla of Nile-boats, their high pointed sails showing dark against the glow, and white as a seagull's wing when the sunlight fell full on them.

Lady Nugent belonged to the type of cushion-woman—soft, reposeful, yielding. Borne along by the impetuous rush of her adventurous family she was always cherished by them as their most precious and comfortable possession.

"When they suggested wintering in Egypt," she was saying to Miss Marlowe, "I thought that I might as well be there as anywhere else."

That was the keynote of her existence. It did not matter to her where she was so long as her family envied her. If one could venture on so incongruous a comparison one might claim for her some kinship of

inverted circumstance, if not of spirit, with the desert nomad, whose home is wherever he chooses to pitch his tent, and whose family camp or tramp as he and Allah will.

Kindness to her children bestowed the freedom of the city of Lady Nugent's benevolence on the stranger. Inasmuch as he or she was necessary to the pleasure or happiness of one of the beloved circle, insomuch was he or she necessary to Lady Nugent's well-being.

Her soft placidity rested Hesper Marlowe. Mentally the elder woman's horizon was determined by the girdling hills of her own warm valley, while Hesper's stretched towards some far invisible fusion of sea and sky.

Lady Nugent was conscious of no disparity of outlook between them. She admired Miss Marlowe, thought her clever, even brilliant, loved her for her kindness in the present to her restless Gerda, for her kindness in the past to her pretty Sylvia, for whose first-born her soft white fingers were knitting a soft white woollen jacket.

The deck of the "Nitocris" was a pleasant place to idle in, with its thick awning overhead which kept the sun-rays at bay : with its green tubs of oleander and hibiscus ; with its scarlet and white rugs placed gaily here and there ; with its cushioned deck-chairs and lounges ; and now with the glistening tea-table which stood ready to give refreshing welcome to the expected travellers.

Hesper sat in a long easy chair. Over her thin white gown she had slipped a loose coat of dull Egyptian blue, whose colour deepened the blueness of her eyes. She was not working, although a strip of Irish lace lay

upon her lap. Her gaze was fixed upon the flotilla of Nile-boats, now showing white against the biscuit and umber tints of the hills. Nearer they stole and nearer, their high prows painted in chequers of water-worn reds and yellows, while the blue-robed men who worked the big fin-like rudders called guttural greetings to the watchers on the bank as they passed. Their cargoes of shining dead-gold straw or snowy blocks of limestone added their touch of the unusual to the scene.

Hesper was absorbed, entranced.

"You like it?" said Lady Nugent.

"I love it;" she drew a deep breath. "I have no words in which to say how it fascinates me."

"More than India?"

"A thousand times more."

"Now to me," pursued Lady Nugent, with a soft clicking of her needles, "it is all very flat and uninteresting. It's hot and dusty, and I can smell the village distinctly."

"So can I, but I don't mind that."

"You and Mr. Ivors ought to get on. He is positively rabid on the subject of Egypt in general and the Nile in particular. Now *he's* a charming man. So pleasant and amusing—says things no one else would ever even think of. Gerda and Roddy think no end of him. We saw a good deal of him in Cairo last year. It was he who fired Sir George with enthusiasm to come up the Nile this winter. What I like about him is that he is the same to all women, more or less—just as nice to me as to Gerda."

"That sameness must be a trifle monotonous," answered Hesper, fighting against a rising prejudice.

"I said 'more or less,' " returned Lady Nugent. She laid down her knitting and bent confidentially forward. "I only hope that Gerda won't fall in love with him."

"Why did you ask him if you were afraid of such a contingency? Besides, if I read Gerda aright, she would look on him as elderly—fatal word! and consider him rather soft because he neither shot, rode, nor hunted. Gerda's ideal at present is the sporting hero. I don't think you need be alarmed."

"That's all right," said Lady Nugent comfortably. "Besides, if Gerda wanted to fall in love, she'd do it, no matter what precautions I might take. But, dear Miss Marlowe, you couldn't call him elderly. The spirit of youth looks out of his eyes."

A faint wonder stirred Hesper Marlowe. What sort of personality had aroused this poetic fervour in Lady Nugent, whose vocabulary consisted, as a rule, of phrases echoed from the daily speech of those around her?

Aloud she said lightly: "Then he suffers from the same complaint as I do—incurable youth! Poor man!" The touch of mockery linked them.

"I wonder why he has never married," Lady Nugent went on. "Last winter in Cairo a rich American literally flung herself at his head, and pursued him so hotly that he had to flee into the desert to escape from her."

"Disgusting!" Scorn curled Hesper's lip.

"Well, he went into the desert at any rate—'to study the effect of shadows on the sand,' he said."

There was a pause.

"She was very pretty too, in an exotic, flower-like style."

"Was she?"

"Yes, I heard him say so."

Ah, Hesper had not recognised from whom Lady Nugent could have culled the phrase "exotic flower——"

"I wonder why he didn't——!"

"Do you think every one must needs marry, dear Lady Nugent?"

"I think every one ought to."

"Even widows and widowers?"

"Certainly widowers. It's a heaven-sent chance for the poor female sex. But widows? That's a different matter. No, I don't think widows should re-marry. It's not fair that any woman should have two men."

Hesper laughed, then sobered. "Mr. Ivors' tragedy must have cut deep."

"What tragedy?"

Hesper regretted her unconsidered speech. Absurdly, she felt as if she had betrayed a confidence, but hesitation would have been equally absurd.

"He lost his wife and son sixteen years ago. They died of diphtheria."

"How shocking! Some one told me that his wife died in a lunatic asylum, but they must have made a mistake. Or was it that other man, the one who paints camels so well?"

"Probably. It was Mr. Carteret of Port Said who told me. I don't think they ever speak of it, though."

"Naturally. I must try not to mention diphtheria

while they are here. Fortunately it is not a disease of the country, and in any case I hate talking about diseases. You like the girl, you said."

"Yes. She has a charm all her own. I am sure you will like her."

"I'm sure I shall. It will be so nice for Gerda to have a companion."

For a moment Hesper wondered if Lady Nugent, in the dual invitation to father and daughter, had cloaked the wisdom of the serpent with the innocence of the dove? The perpetual presence of a grown-up daughter is likely to clip the wings of a schoolgirlish fancy for the father of such a one—likely to clear the vision to a perception of his paternal authority, the weight of his advancing years. Hesper smiled at the thought, wondering too if Hildred and Gerda would amalgamate; if Hildred would respond to the irresponsible youth of Gerda, or if Gerda would be repelled by the hint of quiet maturity in Hildred's manner?

"Here they are!" said Lady Nugent. "I see George's grey hat among a crowd of *tarbûshes*." She waved her knitting in welcome, and Hesper turned to face the land.

Yes, there they were, Sir George, tall, thin, brown; Hildred, quaker-like in grey, but with radiant apple-blossom face; Gerda, tall and fair, waving her sun-umbrella, and the much-discussed Mr. Ivors looking ridiculously young in the distance. Behind them came the Arabs with their luggage, and in a moment the "Nitocris" was seized, boarded, and bombarded with greetings, welcomes, questions and introductions.

Hildred, bewildered with the novelty of having her

shoes and skirts brushed with an ostrich-feather brush by a tall Nubian the moment she stepped on deck, flew to her friend when Lady Nugent's greetings were over.

"Isn't this too delightful for words?" she said, with a quick girlish hug. "I want to introduce my father to you."

A certain undertone in the words told Hesper that past tremors were merged in present pride of possession. More than that she had not time to read, but her impulses leaped in warm response to the girl's evident reaction from her former lonely apprehensions.

"It's good to see my travelling-companion again, though I felt that we should meet somewhere."

"You had vanished the other night when I turned round."

"I used my fernseed and became invisible when I saw that you needed me no longer."

"I want to introduce my father to you. Don't use your fernseed again."

Some faint premonition touched Hesper, that, as far as the Ivors' family was concerned, the fernseed of invisibility had become unavailable. They had entered into her life for good or ill: they, not only the girl but the man, had preoccupied her thoughts and filled her musings.

She turned, with an odd sense of meeting Fate.

"Father." The word fell from Hildred's lips for the first time and stirred a new sensation in Ivors. "You were right when you said that this was a lucky day. I want to introduce you to Miss Marlowe, who was so good to me on the voyage."

"A lucky day indeed," he murmured, inwardly add-

ing, "I wonder?" as he came forward to fulfil the destiny which had been wrought for him by the Silent Spinners in the soundless hours.

He saw Ysolt of Ireland—Ysolt the Fair—with "black-blue hair and Irish eyes"—a branch of Evin's apple-tree with "twigs of white silver" upon it and "buds of crystal with blossoms"—a type of alluring remoteness and magic nearness, the nearness and remoteness of the stars and the night. The eternal question in his eyes sought and found the eternal question in hers. In the closed book of Fate lay the answer.

He bowed, but Hesper Marlowe held out a friendly hand.

"I scarcely need an introduction," she said, in the low rippling tones that Hildred was so glad to hear again. "I have seen a picture of yours downstairs, which speaks to me like an old friend."

"Which is that?" asked Ivors interested. Did he catch the gleam of a crystal?

"Nile Dawn," put in Gerda Nugent, coming up. "We can't get Miss Marlowe to be really nautical, no matter how much we try, nor mammy either. They will say 'upstairs and downstairs' until it nearly brings on a relapse for poor Roddy."

"You cannot be nautical on the Nile," objected Ivors. "It's absurd; it's an anachronism. The Nile is not the sea."

"It's a river," laughed Gerda, "and a ship is a ship; a river is water and water's the sea, therefore the Nile must be the same as the sea. Isn't that good logic, Smarlie?"

"It may be good logic," Hesper answered, "but it isn't true. The Nile—is—the Nile. It seems absurd, but there is really no word which describes it."

Ivors' eyes met hers in a sudden flash of understanding.

"Why do you call her Smarlie?" asked Hildred.

"School abbreviation. From Miss Marlowe to Smarlowe and from Smarlowe to Smarlie-for-short is an easy transition."

"As easy as it is ugly," said Ivors abruptly, turning to greet Roddy, who came wearily on deck with an assumption of perfect health which was cheerily accepted by every one.

Hildred found herself the centre of the younger group, drawn by their unaffected manners into the quick intimacy of youth. The closeness of the bond which knit the family together was apparent in every word of the easy friendly intercourse, and if perception of it stung the girl with some sense of contrast, she was, for the moment, content with circumstance and the mellowing relations with her father.

Ivors slipped naturally into his groove of accustomed friendship with the Nugents, and unobtrusively studied Miss Marlowe, who was, to his beauty-loving soul, a type as fascinating as unfamiliar.

The *dahabieh* "Nitocris" had started on the arrival of the travellers and glided with dreamy motion past the flat-topped umber hills, across whose jutting scarps and amethyst-grey clefts blue cloud-shadows fled and vanished. Stretches and slips of vivid green from the springing crops alternated, on the Libyan side, with

patches of wet brown land whose rich mud awaited the seed-scattering of blue-girt *fellahîn*.

Along the bank went intermittent silhouettes : strings of laden camels, of camels with cloaked and bearded riders, ambling from the pages of the " Arabian Nights," from old tales of caravans and spice-merchants, coloured with romance, tintured with mystery, till through the golden dusk one could almost smell aloes and ambergris. Silhouettes of pink-robed children leading grey, lumbering water-buffaloes : of black-draped women, water-jars on head, in poise as beautiful as the captured grace of some Attic frieze.

Past them all flowed the immemorial Nile, muddy and turbid, but powerful with a spell beyond all telling—the mighty river but for whose rich beneficence Egypt, with all her mystery, her ancient arts and time-defying temples, her wonderful antiquity and fertile modernity, would be but a waste desolation of burning sand and rock.

Later, when Ivors had removed the dust of travel, he returned to the upper deck and drew a chair close to Miss Marlowe's.

" I see that it all appeals to you," he said softly.

She looked up with interest. Her path in youth had lain aloof from men, and it was only the past few years that had brought contact. Of the arts of coquetry or deliberate allurements she knew nothing, and, while it gave her a keen pleasure to meet with any who cared about the things for which she cared, any hint of warmer feeling or tentative promotion of friendship to something closer, froze her back into frightened

retreat. The "twigs of white silver and buds of crystal with blossoms" were not for any man's plucking.

All that she had heard of Ivors half-fascinated, half-repelled her. The Eve in her desired personal confirmation of the man's admitted charm, while the Dian-Spirit of her Celtic ancestry rebelled at the thought of capture or capitulation.

"One need not succumb to such an easy charm," she thought, "such an easy, self-confident, impertinent charm," and she steeled herself against it, thereby unconsciously admitting its power.

"Yes," she answered aloud. "It appeals to me indescribably."

"Ah, indescribably. There is no other word. The veil of Egypt——"

"Blinds one's eyes, so that one neither sees the ugly sights, feels the dust, nor smells the odours," put in Hesper quickly.

"Not every one's, and not so quickly."

"Yes, at once," she objected.

"How did you know?"

"Ah, I knew," she nodded wisely. "I knew when I saw your picture—the Nile-boats stealing out of the pearly, amethyst mists of dawn—and I knew what I felt myself."

"What you felt yourself? Is that sympathy or intuition? I wonder?" said Ivors slowly.

"Perhaps a touch of both. It's wonderful, this Nile-magic," Hesper spoke half to herself.

"Ah, you haven't really seen it yet. Wait until we get farther up the river, until you have seen the temples, until you have become one with the lotus-life. How it

maddens me when people talk of its being dirty, or muddy, or uninteresting ! Uninteresting ! Good Lord, they don't deserve to have eyes in their heads ! Don't they know that all flowers have their roots in mud ? Mud ! Can't they look above the mud if they don't like it ? No, they can't. They have the minds of bats. When the pageant of the sky spreads a different brilliance before them night after night they say they are ' fed up with sunsets.' Did you ever hear such a loathly expression ? When they see the wonder of the Nile unfolding day by day they say that they are sick of boats and palms. Sick of the boats that are always so suggestively beautiful, whether they go singly or in groups like clouds of white butterflies in vanishing perspective ; whether they sail towards the rose of sunset or out of the hyacinth mists of dawn : whether they dazzle in the hot sunshine or lie still at night, with butterfly-wings folded and slender masts slanting like wind-swept reeds against a fading saffron sky."

" Ah, that is how I saw them at Port Said ! I have never forgotten. Did Hildred tell you ? You used almost my very words. The simile is the same—wind-bent rushes."

" How odd ! No, she did not. Another instance of sympathetic intuition." He smiled at Hesper, who, almost in spite of herself, smiled back again. It was pleasant to have one's moods understood. " Do you paint ? "

" I used to copy a little once, but then, when I grew to see, to appreciate, of course I gave it up."

" On account of your limitations ? "

" Too big a word ! On account of my utter ignor-

ance. I loved the art too much to desecrate it with my wretched attempts."

"Wise woman! O woman, trebly wise! But surely those slender fingers do something besides embroider?"

Hesper drew herself up a little, and clasped the slim hands that lay idle on her lap.

"They play the piano."

"Forgive me. My tongue is for ever treading on the heels of my thoughts, and I always notice people's hands. I don't mean to be rude."

"I'm sure you don't, but I happen to dislike personalities."

"I must err again, then," said Ivors, with his air of eager boyishness, "and get it all over at once." He spoke quickly to ward off interruption. "You are beautiful. I should like to paint you some day. May I? There, it's out now. Are you angry with me?" His tone held a careless assumption of the forgiveness which was so rarely denied him.

"I don't suppose that any woman is ever angry at being called beautiful," returned Hesper slowly, "but I don't think I should care to be painted, somehow."

"I won't paint you somehow. I'll paint you anyhow, or nohow, contrariwise," laughed Ivors. "Your type is new to me. Please be as agreeable as you look."

Hesper hardened her heart. A new type—that was all. Another butterfly to be added to his collection.

"I didn't think you painted figures."

"I don't, as a rule. Besides, your face is all I want. Just think. One little seventh part of your whole microcosm. Can you really be so disobliging?"

Once more Hesper smiled in spite of herself.

"Ah, you're relenting."

"I'll think about it."

"Thank you. That crumb must content me for the present. I never can wait until the whole loaf is attainable," he added ruefully. "I must always leap before I look."

"What happens then?"

"I find that I generally alight near the loaf——"

"And that you don't want it when you do," put in Hesper quickly.

"Now we have come to thought-reading," cried Ivors. "Are you an expert in all the mental sciences? Sir George does not allow the Black Art to be practised on board the 'Nitocris.'"

"Doesn't he?" The wind, which so often springs up on the Nile in the evening, loosened and lifted a black tendril from the waves of hair on her forehead.

Ivors felt a sudden inclination to touch it and put it softly back in its place. There was something instantly attractive to him in this woman, in the direct glance of her changing eyes, in the persuasive melting tones of her voice, in the very absence of conscious effort to charm. The slight touch of aloofness pleased while it piqued him, and he felt instinctively that this elusive Celtic temperament, embodied in the contrast of night-black hair, milk-white skin, and sea-blue eyes, held among its gifts and graces the seed of a friendship which would be worth culture.

"There's nothing personal in the sunset, the Lord be praised!" he ejaculated suddenly. "Just look at it."

Hesper, unused to what he called his grasshopper-

flights, could not follow his train of thought, save that in some way it concerned her.

"Here's Hildred," she said, with some sense of relief. "Hildred, come and see your first Nile sunset." She put out a welcoming hand to the girl, who stood hesitant at the top of the steps.

"I had to come. I've unpacked and put away all my things in my dear little cabin. Then I saw a glow which I could not resist, so I came up on deck, and when I heard your voices they drew me." She leaned against the rail and looked across the water, her clear young profile outlined against the sky.

"You will oblige me greatly by sitting down," said her father. "At present you obscure at least one-third of my horizon."

"I don't want to obscure anyone's horizon," answered Hildred, taking a cushion from an adjoining lounge and sitting down between the two. She glanced under her lashes at her father. His tone had been dry. Could he be annoyed with her for having interrupted his conversation with Miss Marlowe? Absurd!

With a touch of exhilaration induced by the crisp Egyptian air and the novelty of her surroundings she patted his knee and said:

"I wonder if I could make you laugh?"

His smile flashed out in response.

"Why, you silly baby? Do I look obnoxiously right, or ready, or waiting, or what?" He touched the back of her hand.

"It's all right now," said the girl happily. "Let us watch the sunset in peace."

To Hesper the inclusion brought a sudden waft of

loneliness. In Ivors it renewed that novel and not unpleasant sense of domesticity : that anchored feeling of having some one even temporarily dependent upon one.

In silence they watched the pageant of the sky as it flamed in luminous scarlet clouds which melted to gold at their outer edges. Detached from the mass a feather of cloud trailed its rosy length across the blue. The sun sank : the flames burned orange : the cloud-feather turned a filmy brown. The light faded, died, turned silvery. Then the afterglow of saffron flared sombrely behind a black line of palms on the western bank. On the forepart of the deck an Arab boatman prostrated himself in prayer. The land merged gradually into a strip of shadow, and night, blue and star-set, fell with incredible swiftness.

Hesper drew a long breath. Ivors turned to her.

" Did you note the curious green where the blue of the sky melted into the horizon colours ? " he asked.

" I did."

" How often have I tried to paint it ! It is a colour of the *afrîts* ! I believe that they alone know how to mix it, for I never can get it to my satisfaction. The nearest thing to it that I have ever seen is the greeny-turquoise shade which you'll see in some of the old temples. The love-colour, the ancient Egyptians used to call it. It's one of the three things I'm always looking for."

" What are the others ? "

" The Crystal of Understanding, the little Green Bird who knows everything, and—the Love-Colour."

" Perhaps——" began Hesper, and then stopped.

"Perhaps," he echoed. "I wonder?"

"There's no cage strong enough to hold the Green Bird," said Hildred hastily. "And no human being perfect enough to bear the test of the Crystal of Understanding."

"Perhaps the Love-Colour would supply the deficiencies of both," said Hesper, rising, and looking at the girl with a smile as she moved away.

CHAPTER VII

“ TO-DAY IS SWEET ”

THE Nile journey glided on in fashion as dream-like as the motion of the *dahabiyeh* “ Nitocris.”

The little group of people who were thrown into such close proximity harmonised pleasantly. So far, the hours made little mark, but, as they filtered by, each left its unnoted trace upon the threads of life which Fate, at the moment, wove into one wide web.

On a windy morning they passed the Bird Mountain, whose high bluffs, dazzlingly white where quarried, honeycombed with holes of unexpected darkness and traceried here and there with fan-like stalactite effect, rose sheer from the water. At its base were narrow crop-strips of brilliant green, while its summit was crowned with a Coptic monastery and village—small square sun-baked houses topped by four bubble-like white domes—to which a steep flight of roughly-cut steps gave access from the shore.

It loomed remote and secret on this colourless day, whose sky was streaked with thin white clouds and sudden rifts of blue, while the river shivered in grey and dove-colour where it did not catch the silver of the sun-sparkles.

On a sandy islet a flock of storks and herons meditated, one-legged, in grey and white repose.

Lady Nugent knitted comfortably, happy in the thought that they were yet some days from action, as exemplified by donkey-riding and sight-seeing. Roddy, lying in a long deck-chair, laughed over a novel he was reading, from which he now and again read extracts to the two girls, who were arranging snapshots in an album.

Hesper Marlowe, curled up on the end of the divan, looked from the mountain to the water and from the water to the deck which Sir George and Ivors paced in pursuance of their morning mile.

In spite of herself Hesper felt a kinship of spirit with the artist, the dawn of a growing friendship, on which he in no way trespassed. He did not attempt to flirt with her, as she understood the art, and he paid her no more compliments, save occasionally the exquisitely subtle one of a glance that claimed and received an answer of mutual understanding. It was to her he turned for anything which needed a special comprehension—an effect of plummy date-palms purple against the rose of day's after-glow: a vignette of young girls standing on the bank, slim as reeds, with their backs to the setting sun which shone through their flowing scarlet shawls with strange effect, making their slender bodies look as though they were outlined in flame: a flight of pigeons, fluttering and circling, pearl-breasted against the blue. For these and other moments his eyes sought hers.

Hildred admired, was amused and attracted, but for her Egypt lay unveiled, bare of mystery or illusion. For her it was the gay, noisy, vivid, chaffering East, whose novelty contrasted piquantly with her English

summer. Her clear young eyes saw more of squalor than picturesqueness in the mud villages plastered like swallows' nests upon the banks from which the Nile took yearly toll, and her young heart felt a pity for those whose crumbling homes had vanished altogether in last year's flood.

With all her cosmopolitanism of outlook she did not grasp anything of the Arab's calm acceptance of the inevitable : she had never touched the fatalistic East : she could not hear in fancy the invariable query, "What matter?" with which the Arab greets fact accomplished ; also, her ears were closed to the Song of the Nile.

Hesper, with her knowledge of her own race, saw more truly, understood better, and let her senses float on the dreamy enchantment in which Egypt had enwrapped her from the first moment in which she had peeped through its keyhole, Port Said.

As the Nitocris neared the great bluff Ivors stopped close to the divan.

"Isn't it a strange elusive morning?" he said. "It's a harmony in grey, and white, and amber, with silver ruffles on the water and no real colour except those strong rifts of blue overhead. I want to paint it. I wonder if I could."

He touched an electric bell which was near at hand. Hesper heard its four sharp trills ring out incongruously above the lapping of the water.

In an instant Moussa, in lilac with a purple waistband, appeared, and Ivors gave an order in Arabic. Then he knelt on the end of Hesper's divan, leaning his arm on its back and looking upwards at the towering cliff.

" You idle person," he said. " What happens when you are so busy doing nothing ? "

" I am letting Egypt sink into my soul. I am preparing for the strenuous life which lies before us once the sight-seeing begins. I am trying to gird up the loins of my spirit for the donkey-riding. I am thinking over the words of Arabic which I learn daily from Moussa. I am——"

" Inventing a string of excuses for your idleness to supplement the real one which you gave at the beginning," retorted Ivors coolly. " Is thy servant a dog that he should be pelted with phrases from thy proper understanding ? "

Hesper glanced at him, conscious of a quickened interest. " Do you think you understand me ? "

" Good Lord, no ! I dare advance no such claim, but I think you understand *me* a little, which is an altogether delightful and unusual experience."

Her face softened. " Is it ? But remember, even the most *simpatica* person only touches the fringes of understanding."

" I intend to keep tight hold of the fringes of yours," returned Ivors, with deliberate lightness. " Besides, I'm not at all sure that I agree with you. Let's have an argument," he said, sitting down suddenly and facing her.

Hesper laughed, and it seemed to him as if the wind caught up her laughter, and playing with it, lost it in the ripples of the water. Also, it loosened that tantalising tendril of her hair and blew it softly about her forehead.

" First of all, I wish you'd tidy your hair," he said,

putting his hands in his pockets. "How is one to argue with a person whose hair is blowing about into her eyes, thereby diverting attention from the subject in hand?"

"What shall we argue about?" asked Hesper, amused, as she tucked away the offending lock.

"Call it exploration if you prefer it. Let's explore each other."

Hesper drew herself up a little.

"Oh, you can't help it," Ivors went on with his whimsical smile. "Consciously or unconsciously people will explore you whether you like or not. To me, for instance, each new person is an adventure until he or she, like most things in life, crystallises into a common-place."

"But they do not all become common-places, surely," retorted Hesper, vaguely nettled.

"No more a common-place than the stars, or the power of sight, or to-day, or sunsets—that is, the few. But the great majority! One gets used to them so soon; one ceases to look for possibilities. Don't you know the feeling?"

Hesper had nodded admission almost before she was aware.

"Ah, I thought you did. One feels there are such chances about new people, promises of congeniality, all sorts of possibilities. Then one goes exploring, making discoveries, getting disappointments, finding limitations, until at last the adventure is over, and the person has settled into his (or her) little niche in one's mind, pigeon-holed and put away until wanted."

"That sounds cold-blooded and calculating."

" Oh, no, it isn't. One knows exactly what one will get, and it is wiser to ask for no more."

" And that's sheer cynicism."

" Wrong again," answered Ivors. " It's worldly wisdom." His eyes aided his present explorations; he had succeeded beyond his expectations.

A quick sparkle shone from beneath Miss Marlowe's lashes, and a faint flush showed on her white skin.

" I don't agree with you at all," she began.

" Splendid! That is the fine flower of every argument. Let's get to the root of your disagreement."

" I believe that there are unsounded depths in every human being. You can't docket and label people as you would business papers. If the occasion arose, probably, those whom you imagine you know best might one day surprise you."

" What a comforting theory! And yet, on second thoughts, rather a disturbing one. Is all my calm classification of my friends to go for nought? Am I to live, as it were, in all the horrible uncertainty of a mental house-cleaning, not knowing if I shall ever again find anything where I had once put it?"

Hesper laughed, but there was a little ring of scorn in her mirth. His absurdities had fulfilled their laudable object of ruffling her.

" Your calm classification, as you call it, savours somewhat of superciliousness to me——"

" By the way," he interrupted delightedly, " did you ever hear why the camel wears his air of superciliousness? It is because in addition to the ninety-nine names for Allah, he is aware of yet a hundredth,

and the possession of this secret, which mere man can never learn, causes him to look down upon the whole race with perpetual scorn."

"What a delicious story!"

"Waive my likeness to the camel, and continue. Are you going to pull down my Castle of Friendship about my ears?"

"Oh, you needn't be uneasy. I said that it was the depths which were unsounded. Your classification did not go quite so far, I fancy. Besides, even friendship doesn't often trouble the depths. But in friendship," she continued in a lighter tone, "it seems to me that the more you ask for the more you get. If you ask for bread you get butter as well, and sometimes jam."

"You don't believe then, that friends are like fiddle-strings and should not be screwed too tight?"

"I would rather say with the French that friendship is love without its wings," she answered, softening suddenly.

"You have evidently been fortunate in your friends."

"I have."

"You would be, naturally. Your ideals of the art are high." He had dropped his cloak of teasing in response to her swift change of mood.

"Mustn't the ideals of any art be high?" Her voice broadened in its Irish rise and fall as it always did when she was moved. "Surely you, of all people, ought to know that! Isn't it better to burn your wings in the fire of the sun than to run a thorn into your knee crawling along the muddy roads?"

"Yes," answered Ivors abruptly, stirred as he had

not been for years. "If that's not worldly wisdom at least it's heavenly folly."

"But I am not at all worldly wise," said Hesper, with a little smile, "and I think that remark verges dangerously on the personal."

Something wistful in his regard stirred the mother-nature which is latent in most women, and disturbed her poise for the moment. Any need of her woke generous response, and it was with a distinct effort that she steeled herself against appeal. She turned to see Moussa standing near.

"I don't know how long Moussa has been standing here with your painting things."

"The mood has passed." He shrugged his shoulders. "The desire has vanished. I hope there has not been Black Magic at work."

"I hope not."

"I wonder?" he said, with a swift glance. "Perhaps I had better fight against it. Here, Moussa." He arranged himself where he could best see his symphony of amber and grey, and be out of earshot and eyeshot of this disturbing person who began to occupy his thoughts more than he approved or desired.

He knew himself; he knew his temperament, and he saw danger-signals far ahead. In their distance lay his safety. To-day was his. He would enjoy it to the full. On the thought he rose, pushed aside his easel and came back to the divan where Hesper sat warm with a sense of quickened life, of newly-dawning interests.

"Don't you agree with the Germans," he said without preamble, "that To-day is worth ten To-morrows?"

'To-morrow, why To-morrow I may be, Myself with Yesterday's sev'n thousand years.' "

" Unborn To-morrow and dead Yesterday,

" Why fret about them if To-day be sweet ? " capped Hesper.

" Ah, you love the old Pagan too ! "

" I do."

" And is To-day sweet ? "

" It is indeed," said Hesper, with convincing sincerity. " I love old Omar's rapid transitions, and some of his philosophy." She elongated the " o " in love with a caressing effect with which Ivors, later, came to know and look for.

" He fits my case so often," said Ivors ruefully. " The Persians give the Rubaiyat a mystical meaning and say that Omar meant by the Tavern the Soul, by the Cup the Universe, and by Wine Truth, but I prefer the more literal rendering. Haven't you too, sworn repentance before Spring came—' and Rose-in-Hand, My threadbare Penitence to pieces tore ? ' "

" I—don't know," replied Hesper dubiously. " You see, until lately I have never had a chance of doing anything that called for much repentance."

" You speak in a delightful tone of regret. I hope you made full use of your opportunities when they came."

" They didn't come. At least—perhaps—only those that wouldn't have been worth repenting for."

It was a curious remark: an odd regret. Ivors had an impression as of the momentary subsidence of the froth of conversation which showed deep waters flowing beneath.

He wondered where the depths of this woman's nature ran. Her contradictions of character at once piqued and drew him ; her delicate aloofness, her warm responsiveness ; her quick sympathy, her power of instant detachment ; her gaiety, her light reticence, all combined to form a personality as elusive, and attractive as—he sought for a simile, but found no fitting one.

Meanwhile Gerda and Hildred, tired of arranging their photographs, strolled up to them.

The "Nitocris" had emerged from the shadow of the Bird Mountain, which now bulked behind them, almost titanic in that level country.

"Why is it called the Bird Mountain?" Gerda demanded. "Smarlie is thirsting for information, but she's too polite to say so."

"Study thy Baedeker," answered Ivors lazily. "You will find an invaluable amount of information therein."

"But have you nothing personal to add? You, Mr. Ivors, as an old resident should be full of those little odd touches which add—er—human interest to foreign travel."

"In the days of my younger youth and wilder energy," answered Ivors, "I was drawn in a basket by means of a windlass up a cleft in that mountain. It's a miserable place when you get there, and the only pleasure is to get away. My one personal recollection is of a dim little sanctuary cut out of the solid rock, and a fine old Byzantine gateway half-buried in the accumulations of years. Will that satisfy you, your ladyship?"

"It's dull," said Gerda, sitting on a cushion on the deck. "We want to be amused, don't we, Hildred?"

"Yes," responded Hildred, perching herself on the

end of the divan. "Did I hear you talking of Omar Khayyam? Have you any fresh lights to throw on the Rubaiyat?"

"Heaven forbid!" cried her father. "We can't have the infallibility of young England casting its searchlight on our ignorance!" Then, as he noted Hildred's ready flush, he turned to her and said, "But here's a personal note which may interest you. I've seen the place where Omar was buried."

"Have you been to Persia? I never knew," exclaimed the girl.

"You don't know much about my wanderings."

"Whose fault is that?" she cried under her breath, yet not so low but that the words were heard both by Miss Marlowe and Ivors.

"Whose misfortune, you mean?" retorted Ivors, quickly continuing: "He was buried, by his own desire, at the foot of a garden wall over which hung the branches of pear and peach-trees, which strewed his tomb with a perfumed rosy snow. Eastern writers call it the snow of Paradise. Now neither wall nor garden remains and only the blossoms of the wild shed their petals where he lies. Still, his desire is fulfilled, for, as he wished, his tomb is in a spot where the north wind may scatter roses over it—roses whose fragrance—what's the matter?"

"I've got a cramp," cried Gerda, jumping up and hopping about on one foot. "It's from sitting still so long, I do believe."

"Stand on your head for a change," Roddy suggested, looking up from his book.

"Learn step-dancing," said Ivors. "I once knew

the Highland fling. That ought to work off some of your superfluous energy."

"Or the can-can," put in Hildred, who had not yet quite forgiven her father.

"I can teach you an Irish jig if you like," said Miss Marlowe quickly. "But I warn you that it's warm work, and I may find some difficulty in playing and dancing at the same time unless I 'jig with me mouth' as our old gardener used to say."

"What does that mean?"

"Hum, of course, you duffer," said Roddy. "Don't let them bully you, Smarlie. They're well able to amuse themselves."

"Come along, Hildred, let's get our cameras and snap these Nile-boats coming down," cried Gerda, confiding to the girl as they disappeared that it really was more the poetry than the cramp which had upset her—she couldn't stand poetry at any price!

CHAPTER VIII

BELHASARD

AT sunset the "Nitocris" moored below Minia. The town showed picturesque in the glowing dusk with its flat-topped houses, its palm-clusters and its three slender minarets which stood clearly outlined against the evening sky.

To the left the Arabian hills, here rising like a fortress, there bulking like some colossus lying in state, glowed like deep gold. Their reflection stretched across the Nile, turning it to a river of molten gold, ever burning deeper and more intense until the sun suddenly dipped below the Libyan horizon, leaving the world agasp at the swift change. The golden hills became dun: the golden river a dark flowing mass slashed here and there with silver spears, until the afterglow brightened the sky and faintly flushed the disconsolate mountains with rose.

A cottage piano was on the upper deck, and every evening after dinner Hesper played.

Ivors did not know whether he was pleased or disappointed to find that Hildred was not musical. To Hildred it came with a little shock of distaste to hear her father sing love-songs in a light and pleasant baritone voice.

The Nugents declared that they loved music, but it

is to be feared that they preferred Gerda's two-steps and one-steps and rag-time rubbish to the more classical expressions of the art which Hesper Marlowe had carefully instilled into her.

Of them all Hesper and Ivors were the only real music-lovers, and when he discovered this further bond, the slim fingers, which drew such delicious harmony out of the indifferent piano, and which accompanied with such rare sympathy, were seldom left idle.

Now, out into the blue dusk throbbed the longing notes of a Chopin waltz. It stirred Hildred to a woodland memory: it drew for Roddy a girl's face framed in chestnut hair: it tapped and peered at a locked door in Ivors' heart, and it set alight the fires of youth in Gerda's feet and made her long to dance.

She rose with a whirl of white skirts and swooped on the player.

"Play us a real waltz, Smarlie," she cried. "I shall scream or burst if I don't dance. Come, Mr. Ivors, and Roddy, take Hildred. No one plays a waltz like Smarlie. Play 'May Dreams,' like a lamb, and the very deck chairs will get up and dance."

"How do lambs play waltzes?" asked Hesper with a smile and a half-smothered sigh, as she turned from Chopin into the swinging melody desired of Gerda.

One dance followed another. Roddy forgot his invalidism, and he and Gerda volunteered to teach the Ivors all the newest varieties.

With flushed cheeks and girlish zest Hildred entered into the spirit of the moment. So did Ivors, who was quicker to learn and more alert than his daughter.

"I've had more practice, you see," he said, as she

stopped once, breathless. "This is the way it goes." He swung her round lightly. He was a far better dancer than Roddy.

At last he stopped near the piano.

"You have piped long enough for us to dance to," he said. "Come, dance with me for a change. Miss Nugent will play. She looks quite worn out."

"Worn out? Well, I like that," said Gerda, subsiding on the piano stool. "I could dance all night without turning a hair."

"Ah, wait until you are my age," Ivors retorted over his shoulder, as he slipped his arm round Hesper's waist and moved, swaying, into the cleared space.

The refrain rose and fell rhythmically, and though the music lacked the witchery of Hesper's touch it was a loss unfelt by her. She heard, in response to the honey-sweet notes, the beating of the wings of her vanishing youth. It was an exquisite physical joy, and her feet could have woven that measure until Night drew her veil from the face of the waters, and left the world still enough, as in primeval days, to hear the morning-stars sing together.

Ivors had never danced with such a partner, or one so responsive to the faintest hint of movement. He, too, felt the thrill and zest of youth: he, too, had the sense that but one body moved in such perfect harmony.

"Where did you learn to dance?" he asked at last.

"I never learned. I always knew."

"The magic of the night is in your feet," he murmured. "Black magic, or white magic? Which is it, I wonder?"

"Let's stop," said Hesper, shrinking vaguely from she knew not what.

Ivors' clasp tightened slightly. "Just one more turn and then we'll go and look at the stars."

Not one more turn but many, till seconds merged into unnoted minutes—a time-forgetful spell woven by pleasure, acknowledged and unacknowledged.

At last the music stopped, and Hesper drew away from him. She moved towards the railing and looked into the dark water which slipped mysteriously past the moored vessel.

Beyond, the minarets in the blue dusk of night were delicate as the silhouette of a seeded flower. The orange lights of the town winked and glimmered. Away from the distance came the howl of a jackal.

In the circle of light near the piano Sir George was being initiated into the mysteries of the Boston. Lady Nugent knitted placidly, smiling at her thoughts, which were Machiavellian (in her own innocent estimation) to a degree undreamed of by those around her; smiling placidly at the two who had withdrawn themselves into the shadows: over whose heads shone a remote beneficent moon in a sky bejewelled with stars.

No sound reached them except the lapping and murmuring of the water and the thin howl of the jackal, prowling perhaps where kings once had trodden.

"You enjoyed it?" Ivors whispered.

"I did."

He straightened himself with a hard little laugh.

"Absurd to think that I, the father of a grown-up daughter, should dance with all the zest of a boy!"

If the self-accusatory phrase stung Hesper she made no sign. She echoed his laugh.

"And to think that I, a middle-aged woman——"

"Don't be ridiculous." His tone sounded cross, but it was an ire that warmed rather than chilled the heart of the woman beside him. "You're not middle-aged."

"Ah, but I am."

"Ah, but you're not," mocked Ivors.

"Then neither are you," she retorted.

"Neither am I?" he echoed sadly, looking into the vista of empty years, and seeing old Time, the cynic, with his scythe and swelling sheaf of days. "You've got the true secret, you wonder-worker. Perhaps you could teach me how to be really young."

"Ah, no. You know yourself."

"It's a mockery and a delusion," said Ivors. "What paints the semblance of my youth is that I am always wondering, always wanting."

"What are you wanting?" she asked half-shyly, fearful of trespassing.

"I am wanting," he began. Then he stopped and bent towards her in the starlight. "Most of all I am wanting—as you picturesquely put it—to know how you kept your heart and soul unwarped in those dreary days in which you sold the art you love for a miserable pittance?"

"Ah, but it wasn't a miserable pittance," answered Hesper, spreading out her fingers and looking at them. Ivors looked at them too, and thought, for one mad moment, how good they would be to have and to hold, to caress, to cling to in an hour of need. "My salary was considered very good,"

"How much was it?"

She told him.

"Good Lord!" he said. "What beasts we are!"

She made no comment. She did not try to follow his train of thought.

"And you had a starved life," he continued in a fierce tone. "I know. You've told me that you had no one belonging to you."

"Yes, I was often lonely," she answered simply. "I had no one of my very own."

"Nor I."

"You had Hildred," she said quickly.

"True. I forgot." He thought for a bitter moment of the full life a man may have who owns wife and children. "But you? You must have had something or some one."

"Yes, I had—some one." She turned away with a little catch in her breath.

"Who was your friend?" he asked quickly.

In the darkness he could not see the sudden red that rushed to her face. Her cheeks were burning. She felt tongue-tied; shy as a child and yet with a wistful desire that he should understand.

"Do you know Browning?" she asked, hesitating.

"Tolerably well," he answered, surprised at her irrelevance.

"Do you remember a poem of his called 'Fears and Scruples'?" Timidity fluttered her tones.

He wondered why.

"Do you remember the last line? 'What if the friend happen to be—God?'" she whispered.

Ivors was silent. He was no frequenter of church or

chapel, sanctuary or synagogue. It was years since he had heard the sacred Name uttered otherwise than in vain. He cried to himself, "O, you dear woman! You dear woman!" but he did not dare to give his cry utterance.

For one moment, fleet as thought, he touched the hand that lay whitely beside his on the rail, and withdrew it again while he sought mentally for a fitting comparison for her. Rainbow, dawn-mist, moonlight were too ethereal, too unstable. Beneath the surface lay qualities as true and unchanging, as high and pure as any "fixed star." Ah, that was it! The idea pleased him—"a fixed star."

"What is your name?" he asked in his usual impulsive way.

"Is this a new form of catechism?" She drew herself up a little, surprised, yet grateful for the unexpected turn of the conversation.

"No, but I'm odd. I have fancies about people's names. I like to know what they are—to see if they fit."

"Your own, for instance?"

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"My own is like that of the silliest possible hero of the silliest possible novelette. Ingram Ivors! Did you ever hear anything so absolutely revolting? For many years my most burning desire has been to choke my godfathers and godmothers."

"And your *nom de brosse*?" she laughed softly.

"My *nom de brosse*, as you call it, is I believe the farthing rushlight which for years I have been pleased to consider my guiding star." He gave his head an

impatient shake, as if he would have flung from him some accustomed burden. "But yours? You haven't told me your name yet?"

"My name is Hesper Belhasard Marlowe, at your service."

"Hesper Belhasard. Ah," he said with soft exultance, "I knew it. I knew that you were a star of some sort."

"How did you know? Was it intuition or thought-reading? I begin to suspect that you accuse me of practising the Black Art in order to divert attention from yourself."

"It's the artistic temperament, I suppose," he answered, ignoring her little jest. "I feel things: I know things, somehow. I knew you were a star."

The earnestness of his insistence robbed the words of any petty complimentary meaning.

"I was called Hesper because I was born in the evening. I was called Belhasard because it was the name of the place where my father and mother first met——" her voice broke, but Ivors understood.

"Hesper Belhasard," he repeated half under his breath. "Hesper Belhasard. The beautiful hazard of the evening Star! It is the loveliest name I have ever heard. It exhales the fine flower of medievalism and the spirit of old romance, and yet it is as much a part of you—I must say it—as is your beautiful hair or your milk-white skin. Hesper Belhasard! I could repeat it a thousand times for the mere pleasure of the sound of it. It's like—a bell in a forest, or water lapping, or a bird calling."

"I am glad you like it," said Hesper simply.

She turned as if to join the others, then paused for a moment, hesitant on the verge of an impulse.

"Won't you forget my unconsidered speeches?" she asked at last, with a low coaxing inflection.

"No, I won't," answered Ivors bluntly.

"Please believe," she went on, looking down at the narrow boards of the deck, "please believe that the night, or the dancing, or—the atmosphere, got into my head and bewitched me to the point of a very unusual confidence."

"Don't regret it," said Ivors without moving. "Perhaps unknown to yourself you've done the best deed you ever did in your life. You've shown me that there is at least one woman in the world who has—a soul."

"I?"

"Yes, you—Hesper Belhasard," he answered softly.

Her face was in shadow, but the lights near the piano shone upon his, and showed it suddenly tired and worn.

"Yes, you—Hesper Belhasard," he repeated, and there was something in the smile with which he accompanied the words that brought a swift rush of tears to Hesper's eyes.

CHAPTER IX

DRIFTING

“**N**EVER again,” answered Lady Nugent firmly.

“Wild horses——”

“Or tame donkeys,” put in Gerda.

“Shall not drag me sight-seeing unless I can go in comfort. I consider that it is positively indecent for a woman of my age and size to ride a donkey.”

“Yes, you did bulge rather over yours, mammy,” said the disrespectful Gerda.

“Don’t mind her, Lady Nugent. I believe she picked out the smallest donkey for you and the largest for herself,” exclaimed Hesper.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Smarlie. *You* bulged too.”

“I don’t care,” answered Hesper, lying back in her deck-chair. “I enjoyed it all.”

Yes, she had enjoyed it all: the peaceful ambling by Lady Nugent’s side over the biscuit-coloured sands, whose rocks held little sand-coloured birds with pink bills, which cheeped and peeped at them as they passed on their way to the famous Tombs at Beni-Hasan.

Gerda had incited the more energetic spirits to a donkey-race, and the five had vanished in a cloud of dust, halting not until they drew up, breathless, at the foot of the steep crumbling ascent which led to the Tombs, where a knot of Arabs, white-robed, wild-eyed and

armed with guns—the Guardians of the Tombs—awaited them.

Ivors, who had been talking to the Arabs, came forward as the slower travellers approached. Roddy had forestalled him in mounting Hesper, but neither Roddy nor Arab donkey-boy should dismount her.

It was with an odd dream-like sensation that she had felt the touch of his arms about her again. A dreamlike sensation which lasted through the steep ascent and the opening of the modern iron gates that guarded the many-centuried tombs ; which coloured her subsequent impressions of square chambers arched and pillared and cut out of the living rock, whose roofs were diapered in faded brown and cream and blue, and whose dim wall-paintings of dancers, fan-bearers, hunters, wrestlers, weavers, potters, in stiff subservience to the mighty dead, gave a faint impression of colour to the big bare place.

It was the view outside the Tombs which had interested her most, and she left the others to explore further while she stood upon the narrow plateau, and looked from the buff and umber hillside, barren and crumbling, to the winding Nile, which lay beneath in broad blue stretches, its colour enhanced by the vivid green of the springing corn at either side, its hyaline surface reflecting, with almost startling clearness, the snow-peaked sails of the boats upon its bosom.

She had sighed with pleasure, and then smiled to find Ivors at her side.

"I hate underground or enclosed places," she said. "I always feel as if I must come out to the air again."

"So do I," he answered. "That is why the Tombs

of the Kings and even the perfect temple of Edfu depress me."

"Which is your favourite temple? Philæ?"

"Lord forbid, no! Poor drowning, mildewing, moribund Philæ! Her beauty is the beauty of tears and death now. No, I won't tell you. You'll have to tell me."

"Will you be disappointed if I am wrong?" she asked.

"You won't be wrong," he answered with confidence. "I'll give you a hint. It is the temple where the love-colour is found in its greatest perfection. Lord, listen to those bees! If you shut your eyes to Egypt you could imagine yourself in a garden full of mignonette and roses."

"Bees?" she echoed. "I thought I heard them."

"Yes, the place is full of them. Wild bees and sparrows are the sole inhabitants of the temples these days. You will hear their hum and chirp through the Nile-Song if you listen."

"Another note of it, thanks," she said softly, closing her eyes till her lashes lay like a curved fringe against the warm pallor of her cheek.

Ivors drew a sharp breath and turned away. But he mounted her before he started with the others on the homeward race, and he was ready to dismount her again when they had passed the clustered mud village, through whose palm-stems the sun shone red, and reached the stage where the "Nitocris" was moored.

There were no more such intimate moments as in the starlight at Minia. The lotus-life, as Ivors called it, added a petal each day towards its full flowering,

and Hesper steeled herself no longer against this man, who, but for his little-known daughter, seemed to be just as lonely at heart as she was. She warmed herself in the sunshine of life as it came, not realising what filled each day with a greater radiance, a more encompassing brilliance. She floated on the stream of hours without pausing for an instant to conjecture whither she was drifting.

The ancient magic of the Nile was enforced by the spell which Ivors found therein and imparted hourly to her. It was as new and yet as old as the dædal life which unfolded itself daily upon the banks. It whispered in the tracts of tall purple-stemmed sugar-cane, always rustling, never silent, through whose miniature thickets flitted water-wagtails, bright-eyed, vibrating, and bee-eaters, green as the fires of Spring ; in the palm-groves, in the feathery mimosa, whose scent the warm wind blew across the still waters, or in the dark acacias beneath whose shade sat the village patriarchs in flowing robes.

He showed her the blue, green and brown which are the prevailing tones in the colour-harmony of pastoral Egypt, and then, with whimsical insistence, pointed out the value of the variants from the general scheme. She loved to see the creaking water-wheels, whose strings of red earthen pots gleamed like a necklace of cornelians as they rose dripping from the water beneath : the bronze-limbed, half-naked men who worked the *shadûfs* on the bank : the strings of camels silhouetted against grotesque hedges of pale green prickly pear.

Together they watched the blue-girt *fellâh*, as he

drove his plough, the primitive implement of past centuries, along the rich brown furrows ; singing, as he guided his fawn-humped cow, a rude primal melody of two or three notes with a sudden turn and an unexpected drop at the end. Together they noted the pylon-shaped pigeon-houses which rose above the flat-topped huts, ramparted with red earthen pots and serried with horizontal branches for the birds to perch on : while down to the watering-places, in the orange dusk, came black-robed women with grey-green water-jars, mites of red-shawled girls or white-capped urchins driving dun cows or lumbering water-buffaloes : shepherds, staff in hand, leading their flocks of curly black-horned sheep or piebald, flap-eared goats ; while, squatting on the bank above, men in rolled turbans and rough white draperies shouted out jest or comment as they busily plied little wooden spindles, spinning wool, black or brown.

Sometimes when the "Nitocris" tied up at night they would see tiny huts made of straw mats sheltering *jellahin* who watched their crops by leaping fires ; the incessant barking of dogs being the only indication of the proximity of a village, and the querulous howling of jackals reminiscent of the desolation so hardly kept at bay. Above all and through all sounded the insistent lapping of the water, as if to tell them that the Nile was Egypt, and Egypt was the Nile.

"I should like to die by running water," Ivors said once.

"I would rather live by running water," Hesper had answered. "What does it matter where one dies ? One has to leave it all."

"Oh, it does matter," said Ivors with a little shrug. "Dying is the last great adventure. One should set forth on it fittingly. I hope I shall. I often doubt it. I am a coward at heart, I think," he continued after a moment's pause. "I am not fit for the great adventure yet."

Hesper had no words in which to answer him. She wanted to comfort, but her natural reticence put bonds on speech. How was she to judge another human being, that hieroglyph which no mere mortal can ever hope to read?

"Don't think too much about it," she answered at last, smiling at him with her eyes more than her lips. "If one could only live well the rest would be easy enough."

Live well! The words echoed and stung. The memory of past follies, past indulgences, past caprices crowded upon Ivors. An innate fastidiousness had always kept him from the grosser evils, but cut adrift, rudderless, as he had been in the hottest fire of his manhood, what wonder if he had fed the flame with the chaff and tinder of life? The ashes were, for the most part, dead and ghost-like now, yet they were there, crowding but not extinguishing the embers that still smouldered, ready, if fed, to flare into life again.

"What do you mean by living well—purple and fine linen, or being a good boy and going to church twice on Sundays?"

"Neither," answered Hesper shortly. The mockery of his tone ruffled her.

"Do you mean dropping anchor in some peaceful harbour and never sailing on the troubled waters any

more ? ” He felt a sudden desire to tease her, to prick her into warm retort.

“ You know I don’t.” She turned sparkling eyes on him.

“ Marriage is supposed to be an anchor,” he went on, looking at a kite which wheeled and screamed with thin petulance as it swooped to snatch some morsel from the water with its strong claws. “ Since mine—dragged—I have drifted in strange waters.”

“ Is that simile original, Mr. Ivors ? ” asked Gerda, joining them. “ I fancy I’ve heard it before.”

“ Nothing is original in this time-worn planet, your ladyship,” he said with forced lightness. “ Every phrase and fable can be traced either to the sun-myth or the story of Eden.”

“ Still, I don’t see where the anchor metaphor comes in,” Gerda persisted. “ For my own part I should never like to anchor. I’d like to tie up occasionally, but that’s all.”

“ Do you speak matrimonially ? What shocking sentiments ! ”

“ Matrimonially ? Me ? ” cried the girl with emphatic lack of grammar. “ I’m dead off matrimony. So’s Hildred. Aren’t you, Hildred ? Come here and join the fray.”

Hildred came slowly forward. She had no desire to be forced into a discussion upon such a subject. Her father’s eyes met hers with a sort of mocking challenge. A Pan-spirit of impersonal defiance seemed to have seized him.

“ Well, Hildred ? What are your views ? ” he asked, swinging his foot against the rail on which he sat.

He looked boyish, irrelevant, perched there, and a wave of anger at his callous insouciance broke over Hildred. How dared he? How dared he ask her such a question before these people, who, charming as they were, were strangers yester-year?

"I have none," she answered coldly. "How could I, unless you consider me in the position of the on-looker, who is popularly supposed to see most of the game?"

For the first time she looked at her father with her mother's eyes, and saw something of the maddening indifference, the careless self-confidence which had driven the older woman to revolt. She felt for the moment that she hated his assumption of youth and the youthful graces that made him so popular, his singing, his dancing, his charm of manner. She would have better understood a more dignified attitude towards life; a calmer resignation to its buffets would have won her sympathy, but this careless enjoyment of to-day and to-morrow, this almost boyish zest in the trivialities of the moment, alienated rather than drew the spirit of her own youth. Infallible Youth! Life holds no more pitiless judge.

In his apparent light-heartedness she read no need of her, no desire to make up for the cast-away years. Between them was a great gulf fixed which only a real affection or a real sympathy could cross, and in Hildred's nature was mingled a sufficiency of her mother's temperament to make the crossing of such frail bridges a difficult venture.

Still, in spite of herself, she felt and reluctantly acknowledged his charm, and when he put out a hand

to draw her near she did not resist, but went and stood by his side.

"Wise child!" he said, with a sudden softening. "I doubt if even the players of the game are justified in giving an opinion on it."

"They don't know much about it either," pursued Gerda. "They only see their own hands. For instance, if mammy's is full of hearts——" she smiled across at Lady Nugent, "what help will that be to you if yours is full of clubs? Each person has to play quite a different game, and they've got to play it themselves—just the two of them—like Beggar-my-neighbour."

"Is the object the same?" asked Ivors.

"Oh, you can't pursue a metaphor to its vanishing point like that!" retorted Gerda airily. "I'm going to write a treatise on marriage some day, and I'll get you to polish my epigrams for me."

"I might put too fine a point on them."

"You couldn't, because my object is to prod the—shall I call them victims or imbeciles?—into common-sense once more." Gerda curled herself up on the divan and clasped her hands around her knees. "The first thing that marriage produces is a softening of the brain almost akin to idiocy. It completely destroys all sense of proportion, and is warranted to deaden the strongest sense of humour."

"Gerda, my dear, don't talk such hopeless nonsense," begged Lady Nugent.

"It's hopeless sense if you like, mammy dear. Look at Sylvia, for instance. Before her marriage she was lively, gay, full of fun, and on for any sort of lark.

Now, behold ! she is as dull as ditch-water, without a thought beyond Dick and the baby."

"Quite right and proper."

"Oh, it's not, mammy. Dick and the baby are all very well in their way, but they make a very narrow boundary."

"I don't know," said Hesper softly. "I think Sylvia is rather to be envied. A man and a boy of her own ! What possibilities !"

"Now, don't you side against me, Smarlie. We bachelor women should stick together. Besides, Sylvia's drivelling. She calls Dick Toots, and he calls her Toots ! The Trent cousins are just the same. They call each other Winkums and Winkums. Now if they called each other Winkums and Blinkums or Toots and Boots one might possibly understand it——"

"Lord, you are a funny child !" said Ivors, going into peals of laughter at Gerda's disgusted face.

"Laugh as much as you like, but all I say is perfectly true," cried Gerda. "Remarks about pearls are a little obvious, so I'll refrain. Here comes tea, thank goodness, in time to prevent a split in the camp."

She put her arm round Hesper's neck in passing. "You wouldn't call your husband Toots if you had one, Smarlie dear, would you ?"

"Certainly not," answered Miss Marlowe. "I should not dream of infringing Sylvia's copyright."

In a moment Ivors stood before her, bearing her tea on a little inlaid stool which he placed beside her.

"In all my wanderings," he said, for her ear alone.

"I never threw my dreams overboard, no matter how near the vessel came to capsizing."

"Dreams are light things," she answered, without a glance.

"Sometimes they cost a good deal, Hesper Belhasard," he murmured. "But how should you know, you white, aloof star?"

How should she know indeed? She raised her eyes to his, and in them he read—more perhaps than she was aware of. Danger-signals loomed near at hand, but as yet Ivors ignored them.

CHAPTER X

TEMPLES

SO the days passed.

With such a party there was infrequent opportunity for the dangerous but delightful *solitude à deux*, and the irrepressible Gerda found outlet in various devices for merrymaking which included each individual.

As Lady Nugent declined flatly to ride a donkey again, she was left to peaceful somnolence while the rest scampered off to see the Temple of Hathor at Denderah.

The way led through rolling plains of green vetch starred with tiny purple flowers, and crested here and there with high flat stacks of dry *dhurra*-stalks.

A string of camels came ambling towards them, led by a keen-eyed man in a white burnouse. On the foremost, which was decorated with woollen tufts and a three-cornered amulet, sat a woman in a loose blue garment with a baby at her breast. Round her neck was a string of gilt beads and her arms were covered with gay glass bangles which made a little tinkle as she drew the corner of her head-shawl forward to conceal her face from the Englishmen.

As they passed she said something to the man and laughed.

"What was it?" asked Gerda.

"Something not very complimentary to the English ladies who go about unveiled," answered Ivors. "They consider all of you mad, and most of you bad, I fear."

"Father!" cried Hildred, shocked and hurt.

"Fact, my dear. Fly to the farthest swing of the pendulum from your own outlook, and you may grasp something of their point of view. Otherwise the East must be as a closed book to you."

"Your metaphors are as mixed as my own, Mr. Ivors," put in Gerda saucily. "I like the 'Curfew-shall-not-ring-to-night' picture you conjure up of Hildred clinging to the pendulum! For my part I believe that most men are Turks at heart, at least where their own womenkind are concerned!"

"There is perhaps a grain of truth in your chaff," retorted Ivors. "I can understand the idea of those who would seclude their infinitely precious. There is the temple." He pointed with his switch.

"That mound?" cried Gerda.

"Yes, that mound, as you call it. It is not impressive as you approach, I admit, nor does its fascination touch you until you are quite close."

They cantered over the sand, past the fallen half-buried blocks of stone, and dismounted beneath the great gateway, with its deeply cut figures of gods and goddesses, and the broken outline of its cream cornices standing out against an intensely blue sky.

"Hathor was the Egyptian Venus," said Ivors as he lifted Hesper off her donkey. "And all the pillars are crowned with her head, which some Goths, who called themselves Christians, have mutilated horribly."

The spirit of the dead centuries laid hold upon Hesper as she entered the great hall. Its vast pillars, crowded together in towering bulk, seemed to shut out the present from the past, out of which looked down the titanic heads of the Goddess of Love, touched with majesty despite their mutilation ; instinct, one could fancy, with a calm pity for the endless generations of mortals who had had their little day, crowded to do her homage, and passed away to give place to yet another race. In dignified procession they were carved upon the temple walls, gods and goddesses, kings and slaves, in row upon row of high and low relief, up to the very roof which had once been blue and star-studded to represent the sky, but which now loomed brown from the torches of the excavators, whose smoke had also dulled the topmost row of figures to a frieze of bronze, in contrast with the dove-colour of the lower walls.

Over the portal were enormous winged sun-discs, touched with soft blue, dull faded red, and deep golden yellow.

Hesper wandered about the great dim hall, detached from the rest, feeling the mystery, the sense of ancient magic which hung like a cloud about the time-deserted place. Ivors watched her from a little distance. The mighty pillars blotted out the others from sight, but a murmur of voices reached them from where they were seeking knowledge through the lips of the Arab custodian.

Always she came back to the portal with the sun-discs, and stood looking upwards with a certain wistfulness. Was she looking for the love-colour ? Ivors

wondered. Here, in the temple of Hathor, it should surely be found, yet here, save in its inner sense, it was not.

He emerged from the shadows and stood near her for a moment without speaking.

"They all came to pay her homage, you see," he said at last, indicating a carven procession. "King and queen, god and goddess, Isis the calm, Horus the majestic, hunter and hunted, worker and slave. Some time or other in their lives they all passed through the spiced dusk of her temple."

Hesper did not answer: no words seemed needed. The sense of dream returned, even while she was being swept by the impetuous Gerda from chamber to chamber; even while with beating pulses she crept from the light of day through a narrow crevice, and groped her way down steep steps, vaguely illumined by the flickering candle of the custodian, to the hot dark crypt, whose sparse chambers were floored with fine sand, and whose walls were covered with the richest reliefs of birds, and gods, and lotuses, and kingly symbols.

The stifling dusk oppressed, half-choked her, and when a fluttering, squeaking noise attracted her attention, and in response to an exclamation the custodian held his light aloft with a laugh, and disclosed hundreds of disturbed bats hitching themselves about the rough ceiling with their wing-hooks, she felt a deadly fear. Clutching at the nearest person, who happened to be Sir George, she buried her head on his shoulder.

"There, my dear, there," he said kindly, "don't be frightened. We'll come out at once."

Ivors stepped forward. He felt an unreasoning distaste at the contact. He held out his hand.

"Come with me," he said quickly. "I'll take you out to the air. The others can finish their explorations if they don't mind bats."

Hesper took the proffered hand, and they groped for the opening and stumbled up the narrow steps once more. Up and up he took her, through dim chambers and empty corridors, up shallow flights of stone steps until, to her vast relief, they came out upon the temple roof.

"Sit down and breathe the fresh air again."

He put her gently on a block of stone and turned away to let her recover herself.

The temple roof, which had various levels reached by rough flights of steps, was paved with great square blocks of buff stone.

In one corner stood a little columned pavilion, whose Hathor-headed pillars and broken cornice stood open to the sky, against whose intense blue they glowed like beaten gold. Sparrows hopped and twittered in and out, while, in a deep-cut falcon-head of Horus, wild bees had made their nest, round which they hummed with a homely persistence.

The air, the quiet, and the sense of the familiar quickly restored Hesper's poise.

"I am sorry I was so foolish," she began.

Ivors turned quickly at the sound of her voice, and came and sat on the steps at her feet.

"But you weren't, you were very wise," he interrupted. "This is a thousand times better than that bat-haunted abomination."

"I like that little temple," she said, pointing to the pavilion. "It has the beautiful sun-disc over its portal."

"That is the emblem of Rē the Sun, who was the father of Hathor, Mistress of the Heavens. It is supposed to avert all evil." Ivors smiled suddenly. "Now I know that you will love my favourite temple best."

"Why?"

"Don't expect to learn all my secrets, Hesper Belhasard," he answered, looking up with the smile that had provoked Hildred before. It irritated her now as she came up the steps with the others. Could she possibly be jealous of her father's friendship for Miss Marlowe, she wondered. No, it was not that. She had not a mean or grudging nature. She did not probe deep enough to realise that it was the clanship of sex stirring in her on her mother's behalf: that she unconsciously resented his growing friendship for another woman. It did not chime with her sense of the fitness of things. That was all she vaguely acknowledged, and she wondered, as she kept up a desultory conversation with Roddy on the homeward journey, as she had often wondered before, how the tangle of their lives would unravel itself.

As regarded her own skein, if it knotted, she possessed a knife sharp enough to cut the knot, and she meant to use it too. Through all the novelty, gaiety and colour of this new experience loomed a solid background of the uses of life, an unacknowledged yearning for the purposeful quietude of England and a sphere in which one could use heart and hands as well as brain.

She, too, drifted on the stream of days, but it was pleasant to think of action, of a niche and its filling when the lotus hours were over.

As they turned and rode along the broad bank which skirted the Nile a flotilla of boats came towards them, laden with the *kulâl*, or water-jars, which are manufactured in thousands at Kena, on the Arabian side of the river. The sunlight fell slanting upon them, bringing them into strong relief, and accentuating the faint colourings of their cargo—the packed masses of jars, round ends outwards, showing like great delicately-tinted eggs, pink, grey-green and reddish-cream. One boat had a bright blue mast and rudder; the bows of another were striped with dull red and orange, and of another with green and white, while in the stern of one whose rudder was chequered with faded red and yellow sat a man in a purple robe and flame-coloured turban playing a reed-pipe. As its notes came shrilly across the water a boy at his feet suddenly struck up an accompaniment on a *darabûkkeh*, beating its fish-skin-covered end with lithe brown hands.

Colour and sound mingled in one curious harmony, typical of the East, which only could have produced such a perfect blending of the suave and the bizarre.

"I should like to paint that," said Ivors suddenly. "All those delicate colours with the two strong dashes of purple and red. Just look at the exquisite effect of the reflections quivering on the water."

"Very pretty," commented Gerda.

He turned towards Hesper: their eyes met, and she smiled and nodded.

"Isn't there a pottery at Kena where they make all

those things?" Gerda continued. "I'd like to go over it."

Ivors laughed. "What's your idea of a pottery? Tall chimneys, big rooms, furnaces, the whole mechanical process neatly progressing from stage to stage?"

"Well, isn't it?"

"Not as represented at Kena. I went there once. The Arabs thought it was only a mad English freak."

"Why? What happened?"

"First we drove along a pretty road shaded with acacias."

"We?"

"I was with some people. Then we turned into the town—a place of narrow streets, whose houses had high Moorish archways, painted in red and cream, of little squares giving one a glimpse of tattered bazaars full of colour—gourds, tomatoes, cheap calico and sticky sweetmeats—of poorer mud houses on whose flat palm-thatched roofs fowls scratched and picked, of a bare plain, dotted with ramshackle shelters and pitted with holes and mounds. This was the pottery. In black hollows the furnaces were stacked, beneath the crazy straw shelters sat the potters at their wheels, turning the wet grey clay into shapes of use and beauty as they have done from time immemorial. Here and there amid the desolation were rubbish-heaps where the broken shards were flung."

"And was that all?" asked Gerda.

"Quite enough too. Isn't it enough to see the vessel swell beneath the potter's fingers like the bulb of a flower, thin out and upwards, and twist over like a petal? It's exquisite. I love to watch it. We were

taken to see a special expert who worked in a dark crumbling little house in the street. He squatted before his wheel, pale, impassive as a Buddha, moulding the clay to his desire. The place was full of Arabs, men and children who crowded upon us. Buddha made and destroyed shape after shape, still sitting unmoved, with the only light, a shaft from the ceiling, full on his inscrutable face. At last a smile flickered across his features.

"Now I will make you something beautiful!" he said, and made—what do you think? A common vulgarly-shaped cup and saucer! I could almost have wept. I expected something rare after what we had seen of lovely curve and line."

"What it is to have the artistic temperament!" mocked Gerda. "I'll race you to the landing-stage to work it off."

"I accept your challenge," said Ivors, and aided by the efforts of the blue-girt, grinning donkey-boys the two galloped off along the highway, raising clouds of dust.

"Let's all have a gallop," suggested Hesper, flicking her donkey.

"You're a great old sport, Smarlie," cried Roddy admiringly, as he urged on his steed with cries and grunts.

For the first time Hesper felt a gulf of years. What was a matter of course for the active youngsters became cause for commendation in one of her fuller maturity. It was absurd that such a tiny trifle should prick, but it did. Was her youth really gone? Must she range herself among the elders?

To hear departing footsteps is always sad, and no woman can hear the footsteps of her departing youth without a pang.

She did not analyse the cause of her regret. She was only conscious of it ; conscious as of something to be shut away in the depths of her heart, while she watched the daily pageant of the river ; while she heard, never without a sharp thrill of unaccountable pleasure, the crude song of the boatmen on the water, the pipe of reed, or the pulsing beat of a *darabûkkeh* ; or watched the black and white kingfishers dart from bank to bank with sweet startled cries, or saw the red-throated swallows skim the surface of the Nile in long sweep and eddy.

White dome and fretted minaret loomed as they approached palm-fringed Luxor, whose houses, pink, cream and blue, with gay green shutters and brown balconies, gave hints of moving figures and fluttering draperies ; while in the narrow dusty streets life, kaleidoscopic, picturesque, squatted contemplatively in the sun or moved leisurely through the shade, whether in contented cotton rags or dignified silken robes.

The great brown lotus-columns of the Temple dwarfed the modernity by its side, seeming, by its timeless antiquity, to cheapen the youth of the town which surrounded it.

“Letters ! Letters !” Gerda cried. “We are to get letters here.”

“I’ll send Moussa for them,” said Ivors. “Let’s come to the Temple before the light turns red.”

Impatient to land, Gerda led the way up the

tree-shaded street with its little shops at one side, and its group of insolent-eyed Arabs sitting smoking, playing dominoes or *tric-trac* outside the cafés.

Somewhat to her surprise Hesper found Hildred by her side. She had drifted apart from the girl of late. The companionship of the others had absorbed her, and there were no such moments of confidence between them as had marked their parting. The older woman felt a great tenderness towards the younger, and a rush of regret at the jarring note that seemed occasionally to be struck between her and her father. At other times, oddly enough, the touch of camaraderie in their intercourse caused her a swift pang of loneliness.

A tincture of suppressed excitement in the girl's air, an unsubdued sparkle in her eyes drew Hesper's notice. The girl's occasional glance over her shoulder gave the clue.

"Are you looking forward to your post?" she asked.

"Yes, aren't you? But how did you know?"

"Ah, I knew," answered Hesper, with her little nod. "I don't expect my letters if I get any, to be very exciting."

Hildred flushed. Even to herself she did not acknowledge how much she was looking forward to hearing from Dr. Lisle. She had taken him at his word, and tested him in a matter of friendly service, and she hoped that a reply would reach her here.

"I have no specially interesting correspondent," Hesper continued. "But somehow one seems to have no need for letters here."

"Surely this life doesn't content you, Smarlie?" said the girl, who had dropped into the use of the Nugents' ugly nickname. "Don't you want to be up and doing? I do."

"I've been up and doing for so long that I find this land of golden afternoon quite sufficient for the present. Perhaps it is old age creeping on; perhaps it's only laziness."

"Old age indeed! You'll have many years of waiting before you find out what old age is like!" She gave Miss Marlowe's arm a friendly squeeze, and Hesper felt warmed by the sudden return to the old terms.

"There's old age," she responded, pointing to the temple. "I only hope that mine will be equally calm and dignified."

They had passed the little riverside stalls with their clamorous vendors calling shrill attention to the glitter and colour of their wares;—the red and green pottery, tinsel scarves, gay bead and shell ornaments, and antelope-skin necklaces threaded with beads of every hue:—and reached the portals of the Temple.

Hesper had an impression of vast brown lotus-columns, of clustered papyrus-pillars, of sunken pavements and mutilated colossi, of sharp black shadows cast by wall and colonnade, of rows of gigantic Rameses clustered about the foot of the great pylon, which stood clear-cut against a luminous sky.

A crazy mosque and squalid houses pressed above and around the echoing emptiness of the Temple. Children, goats and fowls scrambled in a rubbish heap that poured over a partly excavated corner. A boy

on a donkey ambled along a narrow pathway, beating a tambourine and singing a nasal love-song as he went.

The light grew deeper and redder. On the balcony of the minaret a Muezzin came forth to chant the call to prayer.

Hesper sat on a tumbled block of granite, and watched and listened. The long-drawn chant, dying and swelling as he paced the creaking balcony, woke a memory of the bell heard from the rock-perched monastery on the Portuguese coast, the voice of prayer which wove an endless chain about a sleeping world. The fancy held her. She listened until the last—" *Lâ ilâha illâ'llâh !* "—had droned away into silence, wrapt in content, remote from the world.

Through the fast-falling shadows came Ivors with the letters and broke the illusion.

"Three for Hildred, two for her ladyship, none for Miss Marlowe and one for me," he announced.

He sat down on the block near Hesper without further speech. She was always conscious of his presence. It troubled her with a sweet disturbance which she did not understand.

"My letters are from school-friends," Gerda announced. "They'll keep till we get back."

Hildred had opened hers without comment—a curt communication from her mother, hoping that she was well, and announcing that Katherine was horrified at the bareness of the hussies on the picture post-card Hildred had sent her, who seemed to think that the face was the only portion of the body it was necessary for them to cover. "Remember the morals of the post-mistress in future," ended the letter with an

unwonted touch of humour, from hers sincerely, H. D. Ivors.

Dr. Lisle's letter was eminently satisfactory.

"I have done as you requested," he wrote. "My sister will send you full particulars." Then later, "Miss Arab tells me that you have a knack of letting dreams out of cages. May I suggest for the new accomplishment that you should learn how to put them back again?"

The girl drew a long breath and smiled. Egypt vanished, and once more she feasted on wild fruit in a wood beside a running stream: once more she saw a spare lazy figure with a cap tilted over its eyes: once more she heard a voice telling her to wait until she came to the fork in the road, and then to be sure that she chose the right path—a voice which had said: "This is my hour. Don't shorten it."

She shut the door quickly on that memory and opened Arab Leberte's letter, which told her that Mrs. Ivors and "Auntie" had had "words" on the subject of Women's Suffrage; that the dahlias had been ruined by an early frost ("though I think I must have told you that in my last!"); that Dr. Lisle worked harder than ever, and that she was going in for a new competition in which a prize was to be given to the person who sent in the greatest number of words containing all the vowels.

"If you were only here I'm sure you could help me, you are so quick at that sort of thing," she ended.

How far away it all appeared! What an æon seemed to have elapsed since that epoch-making journey to Burnaby! Truly this year of her full age

was the strangest and most crowded of any she had as yet experienced.

Gerda's indignation cut in upon her musings.

"Just come and look at this!" she cried. "Here is an ideal marriage according to the ideas of the ancient Egyptians! Mr. Ivors, Smarlie, you must look."

She led them excitedly to where a vast unmutilated Rameses stood, calm and colossal, placid and inscrutably smiling, with a beautiful little figure of his wife, significantly insignificant, hidden away behind his knee.

"That just shows their relative positions," she exclaimed.

"Admirably," said Ivors. "A perfect example."

"Of what?" asked Gerda suspiciously.

"Of the ideas of the ancient Egyptians," he returned innocently.

"Of course I know men don't like clever women," Gerda pursued. "If ever I contemplate matrimony I shall conceal any little brains I have as carefully as I possibly can. They always marry the stupid ones. I wonder why? But they get deadly tired of them afterwards. Men can't stand being bored, and variety is the salt of life."

"Take care that your husband won't be pickled!"

Gerda laughed. "Oh, no, he won't be. I shall wait till I find the right man, and then you'll see that we shall be an ideal couple."

"What's your idea of an ideal couple?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, reddening self-consciously at the hint of seriousness.

"Those who fill each other's chinks," suggested Hesper softly.

"And don't take hammer and chisel to make the gaps larger, as so many do," exclaimed Hildred, her tone tinged with bitterness.

Ivors looked at her. The sudden hardening of her young face was painfully reminiscent. Was it his hammer and chisel which had marked those stern lines? He drew a quick breath.

"The bats are coming out. Look!" he said.
"We'd better be off."

CHAPTER XI

IVORS FINDS THE LOVE-COLOUR

LADY NUGENT watched what she called "the affair" with interest, and wondered to Sir George "if anything would come of it?"

To which he had responded:

"You women are all alike! If a fellow pays a pretty woman the least attention you at once hear the sound of wedding-bells! Ivors isn't a marrying man, my dear, or he'd have been caught long ago."

Lady Nugent was content. Of course like other matrons she considered it a pity that Miss Marlowe, with her looks, her money, and her charm, should remain unmarried; but her winter was speeding pleasantly, her party was harmonious, and "the children" were enjoying themselves, while Roddy grew daily stronger and browner. She too, drifted, and saw no rocks ahead, but, in candour, she never was aware of a possible rock until she struck upon it. Fortunately her shallop had always floated on easy waters below whose surface the rocks lay deep, otherwise she had never escaped shipwreck.

Ivors never queried, mentally or verbally, whether his friends were aware that his wife were alive or not. To him, his private affairs were purely personal and no concern of any one save himself. No circum-

stances had hitherto arisen to make disclosure imperative. He had trodden in pleasant places and avoided the stony ways, plucking only those flowers which were near at hand. He had never cried for the moon. Now, above the peaks shone a star, and led by its light, he did not note whether the path was smooth or rough, nor whither it led.

He only knew that Hesper's friendship and sympathy were passing sweet : that her comprehension of his moods and fancies was as delightful as it was unusual ; that he savoured daily a new joy, a new delight.

He did not monopolise her attention, but he was always at hand to do her service. He did not make love to her in words, but his voice changed subtly when he spoke to her, and her name when he uttered it softly, was tender as a caress. He was the best, the gayest of good company. His verbal flights were as wild as Gerda's own, his spirits as light as Roddy's. He swept Hildred, the appraising daughter, into the orbit of his charm and woke something in her heart which loved him even while it disapproved.

Hesper was conscious of the new magic, the unwonted glamour of life which seemed to her inextricably one with the ancient spell of the Nile. Her teaching days had been almost cloistral as far as contact with men was concerned, and her brief wander-years had brought her only admirers and friends, in the more superficial sense, who had come and gone without leaving visible impress. No one had really knocked, no one to whom she could ever open the door of her heart. Hence she was innocent as a child of the real meaning of the golden haze which enwrapped her days, through which

she moved content, detached, like a dream-figure in a dream world, all unheeding of the fact that in life's dictionary to dream means to awaken.

Ivors worked fitfully at his pictures. Sometimes he was up in the dim dawn, painting with feverish energy when he had the world to himself. Once Hesper found him there on deck when she came up to watch the rising sun flood the Libyan hills with molten rose. The hand with which he clasped hers was icy, and he shivered slightly as he stood up to greet her.

"You are very cold," she said, all her motherly instincts awakened.

"Am I? I didn't know. It doesn't matter."

"But it does matter," she persisted. "You ought to take care of yourself."

"Ought I? Why?"

"Because——" she began, and stopped.

"That's a woman's reason! Please go away, Hesper Belhasard. I hate being watched while I am at work." The words were accompanied by a smile that robbed them of any sting.

She only thought how badly he needed someone to take care of him as she moved away and knelt on the divan, looking across the river towards the flushed, towering hills, in which, beyond the amethyst hollows which marked the rock-tombs, the peach-coloured colonnades of the Temple of Deir-el-Bâhari were faintly discernible.

A *felûkeh* full of men who rowed, standing, came down the river. One sang a line of a wild love-song, which the others repeated in rude unison. The dip of the oars, the barbaric quality of the music mingled

with the rush of the river and the querulous complaint of the kites in the air overhead.

"There's so often a touch of savagery mixed with the beauty, isn't there?" said Ivors suddenly. "You see it definitely marked at Assuan, and you hear it in the names of some of the places on the Nile-bank. Kôm Ombo, Nag-Hamâdi, Manfalût! You can hear the clash of cymbals, the blare of horns, the throb of drums in every syllable. It's only a suggestion, though, which finds no real echo in the pillared peace of the one or the superficial modernity of the others."

He rose and stood beside her. He could work no more; her presence drew him.

"You feel it in the valley which leads to the Tombs of the Kings too," she answered. "The burning red rocks and shingle, the blinding white path with its sharp black shadows, the blazing blue sky, the silence, and the sense of awful, lifeless desolation terrified and depressed me. There wasn't even a kite to be seen. No sense or sound of life, except once, when a little brown bird, which I could have kissed, flitted across the path and was lost in an instant among the stones."

"What a sense of colour you have!" he exclaimed. "Now you understand why I didn't go. I hate the place. - Wasn't I wise?"

"That depends."

"Did you miss me a little?"

Hesper looked at him. Her eyes were very blue in the morning light, but she dropped them quickly before his gaze, and a flush, faint reflection of the dawn, glowed through the whiteness of her skin.

"What do you think?" she asked softly, answering his question, Irish fashion, with another.

"I think——" he began, then stopped.

"That's a man's thought," she said, with a little smile, half-mocking, half-shy. "Just as vague as the woman's reason you laughed at a moment ago."

"It *is* a man's thought," he admitted slowly, "but I assure you it is not in the least vague—Hesper Belhasard. Do you want to hear it?"

The Eve-spirit vanished, giving place to the Dian-spirit which would fain elude capture.

"I must postpone the pleasure," she said hastily. "Here comes Moussa to tell us that breakfast is ready."

She thought of his words weeks later when the first glimpse of Kôm Ombo came in sight: four corniced columns against a sky of deepest sapphire, standing out on a little bluff some forty feet above the river.

Before her feet touched shore or trod its sunken pavements she knew instinctively that this was Ivors' favourite temple. She had intuitions about him, his tastes, his distastes: she understood him, she felt, as no one else did: as no one else could. At last she realised what had befallen her: realised it with a rush of glorious shame, of golden confusion. That the ivory shrine was filled at last, she scarcely admitted to herself, but she locked and guarded its door lest any should catch a glimpse of its secret.

She could fill his chinks, she thought, if—and the if, large as it loomed, melted somewhere into when. She saw his faults, his brief petulances, his occasional selfishnesses, the many accessories of the artistic

temperament, but she regarded them all with a large tenderness.

The Silent Spinners must have smiled at the tangle they had wrought in these human threads, for here was Hesper, proud in her ripe womanhood, the "branch of Evin's apple-tree, with twigs of white silver and buds of crystal with blossoms," bent for the plucking of one whose hands were fettered, whose freedom lay in chains.

The stately Temple crowning the crumbling height above a wide shimmering stretch of water exhaled an ancient magic which merged into the quality of Hesper's visions. It was not alone the magic of sheer beauty which held her heart in thrall: it was something subtler, less tangible—the exquisite moment of the dream before the awaking:—a spell expressed in sculptured columns, ruined but beautiful, where king and god stood out in delicately-coloured relief; in double portals over whose square entrances the sun-discs of Rē averted all evil with their outspread wings of faded turquoise faintly tipped with red; in broken cornices, curving like the crest of a wave; in frieze of sun-crowned serpents, cream, Egyptian-red and golden-yellow; in colonnade and architrave free to the blue of heaven, in the dim loveliness of vanishing colour, the mere echo of a pageant of past brilliance.

The spirit of dead centuries seemed to brood over court and columned aisle, which echoed no longer to festal hymn or tread of worshipper. The warm sun-filled silence was only broken by the inconsequent chatter of sparrows, the honeyed hum of wild bees,

and the murmur of voices from a knot of white-robed Arabs who squatted by the entrance gate.

Hildred "did" her Temples thoroughly and conscientiously, aided by Roddy, who cared no more for the richly-carved history of the animal-headed gods and goddesses than she did. Gerda flitted from point to point, punctuating discoveries with little shrieks of delight, and dragging her parents hither and thither to share them with her.

Hesper wandered about, heart and soul responsive to the lightness and delicacy of the ruined loveliness which surrounded her—a joy enhanced by the presence, unobtrusive yet understanding, of the one person in whom the light of Hesper's firmament was fast becoming concentrated.

At last, as ever, the river drew her, and she sat on the low parapet in the outer courtyard, which overlooks the Nile. Behind her rose the temple: around her broken columns cast deep, clean-cut shadows on the uneven pavements, shadows which lay almost purple upon the biscuit-coloured stones. Away to the North a shimmering blue stretch of water ended in peach-coloured desert and sand-hills, while to the southwards the river-banks were fringed with palms.

Ivors stood beside her, one foot on the parapet, elbow on knee, chin on hand, gazing towards some unseen distance.

She looked at him, moved, sighed, spoke, and invoked the interference of the Fates,

"It's this one, of course," she said, in her softest, most melting tones.

"How did you know?" He did not need to ask what she meant.

"Ah, I knew. Of course I knew."

"But how?" he persisted, still without looking at her.

The fact gave her courage. Speech, which had suddenly become difficult, was easier when his eyes were not upon her.

"Because—because of the love-colour," she half-whispered.

"Because of the love-colour," he repeated slowly, dully.

Between the instant of her speech and his echo a strange thing had happened. The scales had fallen from his eyes and he saw in one illuminating flash that to which he now knew he had wilfully blinded himself. He loved her, he desired her, she was the one woman in the world for him, and he could not tell her so. He had had other easier loves: into other ears had he poured foolish nonsense (which he had called by the great name, that elastic monosyllable into which one packs so many and such divers meanings), but anything like this irresistible flood of emotion had never before touched him. The sudden rush of feeling caught, enveloped him, swept him off his feet, yet all the time he stood rigid beside her, his hands clasped behind his back, struggling, wrestling with the force of the sudden passion which had him in its grip.

Hesper looked dreamily across the hyaline water. She was used to his silences, silences which held comprehension rather than constraint. . . . So still were they that a hoopoe alighted among the broken columns with a flash of cinnamon wings, and hopped

nearer and nearer, spreading its fanlike crest now and then in a flutter.

"What a pretty bird!" she said.

Ivors strove for speech. When he found it his words seemed to himself hoarse and choked, but she apparently noticed nothing. She did not know: she must never know. For him, his only safety lay in flight, in abstention from sight of that disturbing dearest face, over which shades of emotion fled swiftly as cloud-shadows; out of hearing of that soft melodious voice which stirred the very deeps of his heart.

"The—the Persians consider the hoopoes sacred birds as well as lucky," he said. How forced and banal the trite guidebook phrase sounded!

"Why?"

"Because they were Solomon's messengers to Balkis, queen of Sheba."

"Were they?" The hoopoe hopped nearer and nearer, perking its crested head. "I wonder if he has a message for me?"

"From King Solomon?" Inwardly he thanked the fostered gift of trivial conversation which now enabled him to cloak his pain decently with light words. He wondered dully at the empty years he had spent without Hesper, at the empty years he would have to spend without her, and in his heart he cursed himself for not having demanded legal freedom from his wife when she had thrust bodily separation upon him. He had not dreamed of the need he should feel, the desperate, clutching, aching need. Self had rarely been denied, and now the toll demanded was heavy beyond words.

“No, not from King Solomon.”

She laughed softly, and the sound smote him like a blow. How could she laugh when he was in torment? And yet—and yet, he would not have her suffer.

“A Persian friend told me the legend in his garden near Teheran,” Ivors continued. “We were sitting by a little brook which ran between tall banks of white irises and yellow narcissi over a bed of turquoise-blue tiles, until it vanished in an orchard of blossoming peach, pear and almond-trees.”

“Turquoise-blue tiles,” she repeated in the same low, coaxing tones. “Then the Persians loved the love-colour too.”

He moved abruptly, and thrusting his hands in his pockets, felt something there which he had forgotten. The hoopoe, startled, flew to the top of a column.

“Perhaps the hoopoe wanted to bring you a bit of it,” he said hoarsely, taking a little flat parcel from his pocket. “He finds he can’t now, so it may as well seek refuge in old Nile.” He made a gesture as if to throw the little packet into the water.

“Stop!” cried Hesper, checking him. “What is it? Why can’t he?”

“He—can’t,” repeated Ivors.

She looked full at him, startled as the bird had been, touched with a chill sense of fear at the pallor of his face, the brooding hunger of his eyes. She drew herself up a little.

“Let me see it,” she said gently. “What is it that one cannot take from a friend?”

He felt a wild impulse to fall at her feet, to worship,

and to remain kneeling. Her fine pride had come to his rescue. In justice to her he made an effort to pull himself together.

"Will you take this, then, from—a friend—Hesper Bel——?" his voice failed altogether at her name. He slipped the little box into her hand.

Instinctively she knew that all was over—that the golden haze had departed and left her days glaringly bare, that she had awakened, shivering, from dreams to which she had had no right. What had happened she could not even remotely guess: she only knew that Ivors had awakened too, and that for some reason, inevitable as Fate, the vague half-sensed joy, the rights of her womanhood which she had never claimed, were not to be hers. He did not want her. It amounted baldly to that. And yet, and yet, the hunger in his eyes told a very different story. She thanked God that there had been nothing definite, as far as tangible human relations were concerned, between them, that there was no need for explanation or reproach. She could not understand: she did not even now conjecture: she knew. That was enough, and the fire of her Celtic pride set alight a Brünnhild barrier between them.

Slowly she took the white paper from the little cardboard box with fingers which trembled slightly in spite of herself: slowly she removed the cover, and disclosed a finely-enamelled winged sun-disc, the serpent-crowned centre being represented by a great carved turquoise.

He never took his eyes off her face, the face which had whitened so suddenly, so cruelly. She looked up with a forced smile, but her gaze got no farther than

his chin : she could not meet his eyes again until she had had time to recover her poise.

"It is really beautiful," she said tonelessly. "How very good of you to think of it!"

"It's not good. I—wanted——" Absurd that he could not control his voice. He cleared his throat and began again :

"I had it made—some little time ago. I—I—thought you might like it. I—I meant to give it to you here."

"Here, in your favourite Temple? How—nice of you!" She laughed unexpectedly. She felt cold, rigid, a woman of stone. She only hoped that she would be able to retain coherence until this dreadful moment was over, until she could get away by herself for a little, even for an hour.

"You—like it?"

"Of course I like it. It's my favourite symbol." Oh, God, was she going to faint? She swayed a little, and steadied herself against the parapet.

"Are you ill?"

"Ill? No. The sun on the water dazzled me a little. That was all."

"You're sure it was nothing else?" he asked miserably.

"What else could it be?" she said, with a rush of anger which sent the hot shamed blood to her cheeks, her throat, surging over her whole body. Oh, why had she not steeled herself all the time against him as she had done at first? Why had she succumbed to his easy charm? She buttressed her outward pride. At any rate he should never know.

"I must show this lovely thing to the others," she said, turning away.

"Hesper! Don't," he whispered.

"I forgot to thank you," she said, over her shoulder, hastening towards escape.

"Don't," he said again huskily.

His eyes followed her as she moved across the courtyard, a white gracious figure, crushing his heart as well as his gift in her two slim hands.

He railed inwardly at Fate, himself, his wife. Why had Harriet deserted him, cast him, a man of his temperament, adrift on the sea of circumstance? He had always shirked the disagreeable: here misery gripped him and shook him like a rat. His instinct was all for flight. He could not stand daily contact with Hesper: he would inevitably make a fool of himself and wrong her.

He must leave the "Nitocris"; there were many possible doors of exit. Suddenly the vision of Hildred acted as a check. What was he to do with her? He had brought her out here for the winter: that was the bond. He felt again the gall of shackles of his own forging. Then, with his usual reliance on the willingness of others to make his path smooth, he decided that he would leave her for the present with the Nugents. Afterwards—well, afterwards could take care of itself. Just now his only chance lay in instant separation.

He would have yielded to a lesser passion. It was the strength and depth of this which made him momentarily strong—strong enough to flee but not to stay.

He remained on deck that evening long after sunset,

and coughed a little as he came in to dinner, white and apologetic, his natural buoyancy quenched.

Hesper heard the sound with a pang. Hildred looked up.

"I hope you haven't caught cold, father," she said.

"I? Oh, no," he returned, and coughed again.

The occasion was festal: it was Lady Nugent's birthday. To Hesper and Ivors the dinner seemed endless. She barely sipped her champagne: he drank an unusual amount, which had no other effect than to make his eyes oddly bright. At the close of the meal he proposed Lady Nugent's health felicitously. He had finished the pictures in time, after all, and they had been duly presented to her.

"Do you think," he asked, with quite a successful travesty of his old whimsicality, "that you could spare me for a little when we get to Assuan?"

"Spare you?" echoed Lady Nugent, regretfully. "Are you thinking of deserting us?"

"Not deserting you, exactly. I have been sent a pressing invitation, with a commission included, by some friends of mine, Austrians, who live on an island near Assuan. With unheard of temerity they call the place Gezîret-el-Saâda—the Island of Happiness. They spend the winter there, and they want me to do some pictures for them. I don't quite like to refuse, but——" he shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course you must not refuse," said Lady Nugent kindly. "We mustn't be too grasping. We'll keep a hostage, though." She laid her hand on Hildred's arm.

Ivors glanced across at the girl, whose eyes were

fixed on him. The sudden idea, hurled at her without preparation, woke the old critical spirit, and tinged her look with a coldness which Ivors resented.

"Well, Hildred, what do you say to Lady Nugent?"

"Have I been invited to the other place?" she asked.

"No."

"I thought I was to spend the winter with you," she returned, stung to reprisal. "But, as Lady Nugent is good enough to want me I would far rather stay with her."

"That's right, my dear," put in Sir George. "Ivors, don't be jealous."

"Oh, I'm not jealous," he returned. "I'm glad my little girl has found such kind friends."

Hesper heard of the arrangement with mixed feelings. A pang of regret, sharp and unavailing, pierced through a sense of miserable satisfaction. It was the only thing to do, she felt. He was the one who could flee. She was bound by her former plans. What had she done? What had she said? She wondered dully, knowing in her inmost heart that she had given no cause for estrangement. She had only made a mistake, she thought, as she rose in response to Lady Nugent's signal. Many other women had done the same and paid for it, as she was paying now. In her bitterness of spirit she asked herself the old question, why should one seem to pay so much more heavily for a mistake than for an actual sin? Her wearied mind could find no answer. All she craved was rest and quiet; she felt exhausted, mentally and physically. Would the evening never end nor the hour come when she might

once more be alone, alone to reconstruct the shattered world which had tumbled to-day about her ears.

To-morrow she would be normal. It was merely a case of readjustment. So brief an emotion could not colour a whole life, she told herself, knowing in her inmost heart that she was trying to deceive herself with words which signified nothing. Love had come to her late, and she realised too well that there was nothing evanescent in his coming.

CHAPTER XII

“ HE WHO IS NOT A FOOL SOMETIMES IS A
FOOL ALWAYS ”

THE “ Nitocris ” drew near to Assuan.

All day long she had sailed between hills of golden sand, vivid and glowing, whose high bluffs of brown and purple stone were lightly powdered with silvery sand, blown upwards from the river.

Hesper's pride had risen gallantly to the spur. She talked and smiled as usual, avoiding Ivors neither with eyes nor speech.

But he was miserably aware that her glance swept him coldly, that her inclusion of him was delicately frosted. He had no right to resent. He could not claim the friendship which might have meant so much to him. He would have trusted her, but he dared not trust himself. He was reaping now what he had sown in idleness, and the harvest was a bitter one. From the net of the past there was no escape, and he took it for granted that Hesper knew his circumstances. To have questioned her would have indicated an undue assumption on his part, even if she had permitted him to approach near enough for query. He took his cue from her and remained aloof.

The sun sank behind a bank of reddish cloud with

rifts whose edges were dazzlingly bright. When it had vanished the edges were still golden, but the rifts were filled with greenish-blue, the colour that swam persistently before Hesper's eyes. She touched the brooch—Ivors' gift—which she had forced herself to wear.

“ It's exactly the same tone, isn't it ? ” she asked, smiling coldly.

The smile and the question hurt him. He had not the vaguest idea of how very much more they hurt her. They seemed to move on different planes now, these two who had trodden the same path all those magic weeks. They had no common meeting-ground ; the trivialities they uttered could not bridge the distance between them. One broken phrase, one halting explanation would have gone far towards healing the numb ache in Hesper's heart, and would have turned her from stone back to warm, forgiving, understanding womanhood once more, but Ivors never realised this. He thought she knew : that she was angry with him for loving her : that she despised him. He did not dream that her attitude was one of intense self-contempt, that she imagined that he had been merely amusing himself with her, not realising how far he had gone until he saw or suspected that she cared. She had not been as easy a conquest as some of the others, she told herself bitterly, that was all ; and at least she had not pursued him. He should never have the satisfaction of knowing that he had hurt her, so, womanlike, she set about to see if she could hurt him. It was a poor satisfaction, after all, for she only succeeded in wounding herself doubly with the weapons she wielded.

As the sun vanished, seeming to withdraw all colour from the cloud-bank until it was a dim grey, he turned to her with a last tentative effort.

"Won't you forgive me?" he asked hoarsely.

"Forgive you?" she echoed. "For what?"

He made a helpless gesture which touched her in spite of herself, but she hardened her heart against him.

"There is nothing to forgive. How could there be?" She lifted scornful eyebrows. Her words seemed to transport him to a still farther plane.

"Sorry," he said abruptly. "I made a mistake. I thought you were—a woman. I forgot for the moment that you were a fixed star, shining remotely above petty humanity."

His words stung, and her sense of justice rebelled against them. How dared he, the aggressor, try to put her in the wrong?

"No," she said. "No."

"What then?"

"Oh, I *am* a woman," she cried straight from the depths of her sore heart.

He started and bent towards her, melted by her tone.

"You are. The dearest——" he began.

In a moment the miserable story would have been out, the faulty confession of poor humanity would have been made, and Hesper, out of the strength and purity of her love, would have helped and healed him, would have given of her best to strengthen his weakness, would have striven to aid him to lift his tattered ideals out of the mire, and so doing, would have found double joys of knowledge and service; for sweeter even than the knowledge of the man's love to the woman

is the sense that she is able to help him in the greater things of life if not in the lesser.

But it was not to be. Through the fast-falling dusk came Gerda and Hildred to point out the nearing Assuan, and the moment had passed for ever into the grey valley where lie the days that were, and the lost moments of life.

Afterwards Ivors would have given all he held dear if he could, like the King of Averon, have gone down on his knees and searched among "the dusty heap of forgotten days" to find his yesterday and "certain hours that were gone." He would have invoked the Harper with the golden Harp to whose strings clung "some seconds out of the lost hours and little happenings of the days that were"; but in vain, for opportunity, if unseized in the instant of passing, is irrecoverable as yesterday and unattainable as to-morrow.

The sky was deep blue and star-filled, and the town of Assuan a semicircle of twinkling lights below it. They glimmered on the palm-fringed Elephantine Island like stray fireflies: and shone on the steamers and *dahabiehs* in orange clusters, casting quivering reflections in the water.

"There's Assuan!" cried Gerda.

"Yes," answered Ivors, adding under his breath, "thank God!"

"We shan't lose sight of you altogether, Mr. Ivors? You'll come back to us again, won't you?"

"If the Fates permit."

"Can't you coax them a little? They're only women, after all?"

"There's nothing in the world more adamant than a woman, or more incomprehensible."

"Come, now!"

"Proteus, who was supposed by some to have been King of Egypt, was a woman really," Ivors continued. "Nothing else could have changed so quickly. His favourite metamorphosis was being a man, of course, for he was afraid that if he assumed his true shape the other goddesses might kill him!"

"I thought they were all supposed to be immortal ——"

"Which things are an allegory," said Ivors, looking, unrestrainedly now, thanks to the blue dusk, at the profile beside him, the soft masses of hair, the clear-cut outline of cheek and chin supported by one slim hand. The other hung by her side and tempted him. Unseen he seized it in his own and pressed it passionately. At the contact the fire which ran through the veins of both met and mingled. Hesper did not dare to make any violent movement lest it should draw upon her the scrutiny of sharp young eyes, and Ivors knew, and, unpardonably, counted on this. Then as suddenly as he had taken her hand he released it, with a sigh.

Hesper turned and walked away, despising herself for the mad joy that the moment's contact had roused in her.

Ivors put his hand unsteadily on Hildred's shoulder.

"You don't really want me, little girl, do you?" he asked.

She looked up at him, trying to see whether the question held appeal or assertion.

"Of course not," she answered. "I shall be very happy here."

"I hope you will," he said, with a sudden and apparently unnecessary emphasis. "Lord! I hope you will."

That evening, in spite of all, the strain was lightened for the only two who had felt it.

Hesper played her emotions through nocturne and caprice into the Pilger-Chor, and Ivors sang some of his unavailing passion into lyric and love-song. In an odd contradictory way these two illogical beings tasted happiness in those last fast-fleeting hours; for Ivors knew that he had touched a woman, not a star, and Hesper's heart pulsed quicker with an absurd delight that he had called her "dearest."

Whether Ivors tried to wheedle the Fates or no the fact remains that Assuan did not see him again that winter, save for a fleeting visit to the "Nitocris" before catching a train which was to take him back to Luxor.

He found no one on board but Lady Nugent, who begged him to leave Hildred with them until the "Nitocris" returned to Luxor.

"They are having such a lovely time," she said. "Dances, tennis, camel-rides, desert picnics, all sorts of fun. We have met several old friends and have made many new ones. It would be a thousand pities to take her away, and my young people would be lost without her."

"I will gladly leave her for the present, as you are good enough to want her, but you mustn't let her outstay her welcome."

"There is no fear of that," beamed Lady Nugent.

"She is greatly sought after. Indeed, all my girls are, for I may include Miss Marlowe too." She paused. She was not pleased with Ivors for having, as she thought, neglected the chance thrown in his path. She felt that she would like to show him what he had lost. "Miss Marlowe is tremendously admired."

"Naturally."

"Her type—so unusual, you know."

Ivors knew.

"There are *crowds*, of course, but *one* in particular!"

Ivors had been waiting for this.

"A German Count—Graf von Büilitz—very rich, charming, a castle on the Rhine——"

"Take care that it's not a castle in Spain," said Ivors, inwardly consigning Germany in general and Graf von Büilitz in particular to fiercest flames.

"Oh, no. He's well accredited, and *so* handsome. Dances divinely, I believe."

Ivors thought of that night at Minia when he had danced into love with Hesper, and felt the stored jealousy of hot unreasoning youth surge within him. He rose to go.

"Please convey my congratulations to her," he said.

"Oh, nothing's settled at all. It's only——"

"Oh, it's only—is it?" said Ivors, relieved.

As he went up the bank towards the palm-shaded railway-station, dispersing wild-haired *Bisharîn* and vociferous sellers of bead-chains and mock antiquities with a few well-chosen Arabic phrases, he pondered long and earnestly upon the fable of the dog in the manger.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TOLL

Dahabieh "Nitocris," Assuan.

"**I** WANT to come back to you. Please write to Lady Nugent and demand me."

Such was the gist of a letter from Hildred which Ivors received late in February. It roused an unwonted sensation, and soothed, in a measure, the aching sense of need, of loss which he had felt ever since he left Hesper. She had put to flight his old preconceived ideas of the eternal feminine: she had aroused within him a perception of the ideal, unlike the butterfly caprices which in other women had attracted and amused him. He had, in his easy, selfish way, demanded nothing of life save his art and his amusement. A certain selective fastidiousness had always supplied the demand. He had flitted on, oblivious of duty or responsibility, unaware of the vast net which surrounded him and which would one day imprison him when he really wanted to try his wings. Of the higher beauties of self-sacrifice, of self-denial, he knew nothing. His art, his sense of the beautiful, asserted claims, but there was no unselfishness in satisfying these; and the divine discontent which is the spur to every artist alone saved him from sinking into the slough of complacency. He was one of Nature's

spoilt children, and the secret of his retention of youth was his constant demand "I want. I want. I want." Until now he had always received. Of course there had been a void, but he had accepted that as incidental to his temperament until Hesper came. By the wonder and generosity of its filling he had suddenly realised the immensity of the vacuum, and almost coincident with the recognition had come its withdrawal. It was as if a "magic casement" had been opened for a moment, and then not only closed, but barred and shuttered in his face.

He felt an unwonted eagerness to see Hildred again, a swift desire for his own flesh and blood. What had he not wilfully missed all these years? He must try to make it up to the child now if she would let him. The possibility of doubt peeped at him out of her mother's grey eyes, but with his usual impetuosity, his usual certainty that things must go as he desired them, he swept the idea away. This new revelation of his failure in duty, this awakening to a sense of responsibility, had come late, but it *had* come, and this was indirectly due to Hesper. All these long miserably empty weeks which he had tried to fill with the husks which once had satisfied him, had been productive of thought if nothing else. He had striven to quell the passion which consumed him like a flame, and found that a certain amount of strength had come with the effort, a strength which he did not dare to put to the test of seeing her again.

Hildred found him looking thinner and older when they met. She herself radiated health and self-confi-

dence, and with a sense of apprehension Ivors read purpose in her every movement.

"It is nice to see you again, little girl," he said, tucking his hand through her arm. "You've improved too, or is it a case of absence making the heart grow fonder?"

Hildred laughed. "Perhaps a little of both," she returned. "Roddy was always telling me that I had grown fat, but I don't think that's possible with all the exercise I took."

"Let's sit down," he said, "and tell me all about everything. This is my special corner."

He led her across the lounge of the hotel to a nook containing two luxurious chairs, sheltered by a *mush-rabiyeh* screen, and a tall palm which gave some sense of seclusion.

"Let's see," he began. "You are a famous tennis-player, aren't you?"

"A champion," she laughed. "And I won the camel race at the last gymkhana, and first prize at the Fancy Dress Ball."

"How could you tear yourself from these delights?"

"I got suddenly tired of it." She grew rather red, and pulled at a leaf of the palm.

"Hum," said her father. "Was there a masculine reason, by any chance?"

Hildred sat up suddenly. "How did you know? Who told you?"

"No one. A simple process of deduction. It doesn't take acute perceptive power to guess the reasons which would induce flight at the zenith of a successful season. They dwindle rapidly to two—a quarrel or a

love-affair. I did not think that you would quarrel with our excellent friends, so *voilà!*" He shrugged his shoulders, and Hildred felt unreasonably annoyed.

"There was a man," she admitted, "who could not be taught the meaning of the word no."

"Some men are slow learners. Was he—impossible?"

"For me, yes. I don't want to marry," she said suddenly. "I have no place for that sort of thing in my life."

"Ah, going to play King Canute, are you? A difficult rôle, and one in which you will probably be quite as successful as he was!"

The light mockery of the tone stung Hildred, and made her feel young and insignificant. After all, she was nearly twenty-one. The moulding of her own life had been thrust on her; she was not going to let anyone interfere now. She turned his words against himself.

"Why did *you* flee from the 'Nitocris'?" she asked unexpectedly.

He looked at her for a moment with an odd impulse towards confidence, hesitant lest she should misunderstand. Then he followed her train of reasoning to a different conclusion.

"I was afraid of being drowned," he answered, with deliberate lightness. "I found that I had assumed the Canute-rôle unawares, and that if I sat much longer I should have got very wet indeed."

"You mean——?" she asked, only half understanding.

"I mean," he said quietly, "that I found that Miss Marlowe's friendship was becoming too dangerous for

me, so I sought safety in flight. That's all. Don't comment."

"I had no intention of doing so."

It was a strange confession for a father to make to a daughter, and it half drew, half repelled her. She saw in a flash the pitfalls which her mother had avoided while leaving him to skirt them or fall in as best he might. The gulf of temperament loomed before her, made doubly dangerous by the infinite complexities of human nature. For a moment she felt that she hated life with its tangling threads, that she hated men, that she hated women, that she hated all the artificial complications which hemmed her in; that she, too, longed for flight.

"It is better to fill one's life with work and avoid these possibilities," she said, after a pause.

"Ah, there's the crux. If you can."

"I mean to try."

"You?"

"Yes. That was what I wanted to come and talk to you about."

Ivors felt jarred, chilled. "Surely we have not come to the parting of the ways yet."

"In a sense I think we have."

"But I've seen so little of you!"

"Whose fault was that?"

"Horribly right, as usual."

"I won't talk about it now, if you'd rather not."

"After all, what's the good of postponement? We may as well have it out now, and forget it afterwards."

Yes, that was his attitude towards life, Hildred

thought, to forget the unpleasant as soon as possible, where actual avoidance was out of the question. "You remember that the agreement was that at the end of the year I was to have a choice."

Ivors nodded.

"There were three alternatives. I might live with mother, with you, or choose my own career," Hildred continued, selecting her words carefully.

"And you've chosen," said Ivors, rising suddenly. "No need to tell me. I know which. The eternal ego!"

"That's not fair, father," cried Hildred.

"No, it's not," he said, sitting down again. "I, in my thinnest of glass houses, have no right to cast that particular stone. Tell me more."

"My mother does not want me. You do not need me——"

"Are you so sure of that?"

Her eyes were blind to the appeal in his. They strained towards some distant desired goal. "Oh, you don't *really* want me. I am in no way necessary to you. We needn't quibble about words. I want——"

"Yes, I see that."

"Father, why will you interrupt and misjudge?" she cried impatiently. "I have a right to a hearing, at any rate."

"I beg your pardon, my dear," he returned gently, watching the disappearance of a scarcely-acknowledged hope. "Go on. I won't interrupt again, I promise you."

"You have your art, your friends, your life, in which I have no place. I want the same for myself. I

mean independence, the chance of doing the things my heart is set on."

" You have your art, your friends, your life, in which I have no place."

The words leaped from the past like a flash of lightning. The tone was young, eager, impulsive, instead of being tinged bitterly with hatred.

That was the only difference. This was the toll that the years demanded of him. The careless days which had slipped through his fingers like grains of sand now loomed almost mountainous. The past can never die : its debtor always has to pay. Ivors could not now demand that which he had wilfully, deliberately cast aside. The grey eyes of his daughter, alight with enthusiasm as they were, accused him like conscience. He leaned his elbow on the chair, and, shading his eyes with his hand, sat and listened.

Hildred's words tumbled out unchecked. Her face was glowing, vivid, as with the splendid selfishness of youth she poured forth her plans, desires, and aims. It appeared that she had long desired to be a hospital nurse, and that, thanks to Dr. Lisle, the very post she would have wished for now awaited her. His sister, who was matron of a Children's Hospital in Surrey, would be delighted to have her as probationer. She wanted her to come in March, and that was why—and so on, round the circle again. She was so tired of doing nothing ; she wanted to be of some use in the world ; she wanted a life, a place of her own.

" Who is this Dr. Lisle ? "

" He is doctor at Burnaby. He is considered very clever. My mother knows him."

"Doubtless he has all the virtues," said her father drily. "Does he understand the value and meaning of the simple negative, or is that an art which he has yet to learn?"

Hildred's cheeks burned, and the thought of the art which Dr. Lisle professed to practise rose to her mind, and unreasonably sharpened her tongue.

"Why do you always laugh at things?" she demanded hotly. "I suppose you disapprove."

"Isn't it better to laugh than to cry?" he said with his whimsical smile. "I hate your whiner. And as for disapproving, on the contrary, my dear, I think that you have chosen—wisely. I quite acknowledge that neither your mother nor I have the slightest right to control your actions; we forfeited that long ago. I only realise it now. You have a great deal to forgive, Hildred, and I, for one, am sorry."

The girl was touched, melted. Her heart warmed to her father as it had never done before. She stretched out her hand impulsively.

"If you ask me I'll stay," she cried.

He shook his head. How could he ask her now? "I'll only ask one thing, little girl," he returned, "and that is that you'll come to me if ever I am in real need of you."

"I will. Indeed I will," she answered.

"That's a bargain, then," said Ivors, rising. "We'll go down to Cairo to-morrow, and enjoy ourselves until it is time for you to depart."

PART III
THE LOVERS

CHAPTER I

“ THERE IS NO ARMOUR AGAINST FATE ”

IVORS drifted about the world like a blown leaf, seeking peace and finding none. The moment that he rested quiescent in some half-forgotten corner a gust of impatient longing would seize, rend, and drive him forth again on his fruitless quest. He lost all joy in his art : the zest of living was quenched for him : he wandered from one sun-filled nook to another, and saw neither the sunshine nor the flowers. Once or twice he caught a glimpse of himself as he was, and the sight shook him—a hollow-cheeked man, wasted by the flame of passion which consumed him. He had never experienced such a devastating influence before, nor one in which the base and the good were so inextricably mixed. At times he felt that he could easily revert to the ancestral beast : at others he felt that he could soar to the potential angel which is in man. He did neither, mentally nor physically. He trod a uniform plane of dulness which had nothing in it to arrest, to grip. He walked a grey world which was only lit by the fire of despair.

At last Fate, Chance, Destiny—what you will—led him to the Island of Capri.

The day was blue and sparkling and the scent of flowers filled the air.

After luncheon the *padrona* of the vine-wreathed *albergo* advised him to go into the garden : " The view of the bay and the distant Napoli was superb, but superb in truth."

Ivors went through the open door, out under a pergola of roses whose summer incense was one with the day and the hour, down the grey stone steps of little terraces over which tumbled torrents of pink geraniums and warm-scented carnations, until he came to the last of all, beneath which an orange-grove and a peach-orchard dipped suddenly to the dancing sapphire of the sea. The broad leaves and green clusters of a vine drooped over a little arbour at one end, in which moved a glimmer of white.

Ivors walked towards it unseeing, not realising that it was tenanted until he came face to face with its occupant.

She looked up at his approach and their eyes met. He whitened as if under a great shock.

" My God ! " he whispered below his breath. " Hesper ! Hesper Belhasard ! "

Hesper sat speechless, incapable of word or motion, but her eyes answered him, drew him. He stumbled forward, like one who is blinded by a sudden light, half-fell, half-knelt at her feet, and putting his arms about her hid his face against her breast.

Time ceased to exist ; the world was emptied of all humanity save the two only, who clung to each other long and desperately, as if to assure themselves by the mere sense of touch that the beloved one was really within grasp after these empty æons.

At last Ivors moved, and putting up his hands drew Hesper's face towards his own. They kissed,

"Now you are mine," he said in a whisper. "Now you are mine. How I have wanted you!"

The time for query or comment was not yet. The golden moment was to be rounded to completeness before the intrusion of the actual.

After murmurs and broken phrases came the unsurpassed eloquence of the three magic words "I love you," which vary so wondrously with each repetition. With the oft-rung changes the sense of possession came to Ivors.

"I'll never let you go again," he murmured, tightening his clasp.

"No," she breathed in soft ecstasy. "No."

"You have a lot to make up for, Hesper Belhasard." He touched at last the tendril of hair unrebuked.

"I know. I know."

"How do you know?"

"I know that you have led a lonely and unsatisfied life since——"

"Since?"

"Since—*she* died," answered Hesper softly.

Ivors' clasp slackened. "Since who died?"

"Your wife."

He drew away. The golden moment was shattered. For a brief space he had absolutely and completely forgotten the existence of Harriet Ivors, of any barrier, tangible or intangible, which could exist to separate him from the woman he loved.

Hesper felt chilled. It had been foolish of her to mention his wife at such a time: she should not have done it. In the realisation of her own love she had often thought, half-pityingly, half-enviously, of the

other woman who had shared his life for a time and then been reft away. A cloud had come over their glorious sunshine, and it was she who had evoked it. She bent shyly towards Ivors and touched his cheek lightly with the back of her hand, a fleeting caress whose satin brevity woke a thirst that mocked at denial.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I love you." She elongated the "o" in the way Hildred had liked.

This was Ivors' moment: the great opportunity which comes but once. Destiny held the scales: in one temptation, in the other renunciation. He had to speak now or for ever after hold his peace. He had only to tell Hesper that she had made a mistake, that his wife was not dead, and he would lose her again for ever. The thought that through their mutual pain they might win peace never occurred to him. It was the pang of the moment which pierced him. He had only to be silent to take what Fate thrust at him, this transcendent gift, this exquisite joy.

The struggle was brief. Swayed by impulse, overmastered by the rushing wind of his selfish passion, he clutched at the Psyche-wings of happiness, unheeding whether he brushed off their bloom or crushed them in his rough grasp.

No sense of sin or wrong to Hesper crossed his mind. The knowledge of her ignorance brought too fierce, too subtle a temptation to be wrestled with.

He took her in his arms and kissed her passionately.

"You needn't be too sorry for me," he said, "I—she—we didn't get on. I don't want to talk about it. It hurts."

"My dearest," she breathed, all warm love and

desire to heal. She touched his cheek again, and held her own against it in a shy caress. "Why did you run away—from the 'Nitocris'?"

"I didn't run away from the 'Nitocris.' I ran away from you."

"But why?"

"I was afraid."

"Of me?"

"Of you."

"Ah, but you needn't have been."

"I didn't realise," said Ivors, with a long breath that was half a sigh. Then he shivered.

"You haven't caught cold?"

"No. Oh, no."

"I am going to take such care of you, such great, great care of you; I am going to be such a despot that you——"

"You a despot?" He kissed her fingers. "That I—— What?"

"That you will be sorry you ever married me." Her pulses fluttered. Life was very sweet.

Ivors shivered again, and strained her closely to him.

"How could I, how could any man ever be sorry he married you? My God, Hesper, don't talk such mad nonsense."

His fierceness did not frighten her. She only laughed out of the fulness of her content. "I won't. I'll thank God instead."

"For what?"

"For you," she whispered.

It was then that the iron began to enter into Ivors' soul; then that he dimly realised the truth which old

Hesiod had discovered some thirty centuries before, that when a man commits a sin at that instant he sows the seed of his own punishment.

With a great cry he flung himself at her feet, and clasped her knees.

"Don't," he cried in a choked voice. "Don't. I'm not worthy——"

He would tell her to-morrow, he thought. He could not tell her now. He must have a few hours of happiness before she knew the truth. No one could grudge him that—a few crumbs of joy before he starved again. She had been craving too. It could hurt no one. They must, they *must* be happy together for a little. It was the call of primitive Nature which pierces through the thickest veneer of civilisation, the cry of the man for his woman, his mate. It was the axis upon which the world of creation turned : it was the Song of the Nile translated into humanity.

And Hesper was happy. She drank from a full cup for the first time in her life. Even in those first hours he seemed to fulfil every need of her being, the mother-need, the lover-need, the comrade-need. He called and she responded, she cried and he answered.

They sat there in a dream until the sun disappeared behind the happy Isles to the westward, bathing them in a golden haze, and turning the sea to a faery lake whose molten ripples merged from gold to pale rose and amethyst, while the blue wonder beneath them deepened almost to purple.

He found that Hesper was staying at the little inn, and said that he would come there too, but she demurred.

"Better not, perhaps," he said. "Where is your maid?"

"Nanno's mother was ill, and wanted to see her before she died, so she has gone back to Ireland. She will be with me again later on."

"And the Nugents?"

"They've gone home to Buckinghamshire. They wanted me to come too, but—I couldn't somehow. I felt that I had to be alone for a little."

"Did I make you unhappy?" Ivors asked in low, strained tones.

"Very, very unhappy."

"But you are happy now?"

"Beyond words," she answered simply, turning and smiling at him.

In the waning light her face seemed transfigured with the sense of that inward spiritual flame which Hildred had once noted.

"To have made a woman happy, even for an hour, is something to one's credit," he said slowly, as if arguing with an unseen auditor.

"What will it be for a whole life, then?" asked Hesper. After a moment she whispered, "Do I make *you* happy?"

He crushed her fiercely to him. "Transcendently, gloriously," he cried with defiance.

Later the *padrona* came bustling down the steps.

"Ah! the *signorina* has found an acquaintance," she said, scenting intrigue with smiling delight.

"More than an acquaintance, *signora*. The *signore* and I are going to be married."

"Now may all the saints bless and protect you,"

she cried, "but this is good news. The *signore* knew you were here?"

"But no," replied Hesper smiling. "It was the merest chance."

"*Macché!*" cried the plump *padrona*, lifting her hands. "Then I was the messenger of Love."

The solidity of Cupid's emissary tickled Ivors' sense of humour. He pressed a gold coin into her hand.

"Will you buy yourself a memento of the occasion, *signora*," he said with his most winning smile, "and honour me by so doing?"

"Milord has a good heart," said the *padrona*, promptly ennobling him. "I came to enquire about the *signorina's* dinner."

"Prepare a feast for us," Ivors ordered. "Your best dishes, your best wine. Nectar and ambrosia, which are surely to be found in this enchanted spot."

"*Si, signore*. It shall be ready in one little half hour. You shall have a *frittura*—but a *frittura!*" Uplifted hands and eyes gave but a faint indication of the delectability of the *frittura*.

The little meal might have been composed of nectar and ambrosia or of bread and water: Ivors could not have told: he ate, and drank, and looked at Hesper, and vowed that it was a feast fit for the gods. He toasted her with lips and eyes, tasting for the moment a purer, better feeling than had been his consciously for years.

There was a sense of intimacy, of domesticity in the little feast. Ivors waited assiduously on Hesper with all the sweet observances of love. His gaiety returned to him in fitful flashes, but for the most part they were

wrapped in the content of the knowledge of each other's presence. The *padrona* hovered sympathetically in the background. The maid, Rosina, twinkled eyes and earrings at them with an understanding of which they were only half-conscious. They were absorbed in each other with that happy, isolated absorption in which lovers can envelop themselves as in a cloud.

After dinner the great bay was flooded with moonlight. The warm air was scented with the essence of carnation and rose; beyond the plain of silver sparkles loomed mysterious purple outlines of dim isle or misty headland.

From a peach-tree in the hidden orchard a nightingale "her amorous descant sung. Silence was pleased."

The two who listened heard the music of the spheres, or the beating of their own hearts, or perhaps nothing at all. They talked in murmurs or were silent, while moonlight, melody, and perfume melted into one magic spell.

When at last Ivors tore himself away he thought as he lingered on the narrow dusty road, "To-morrow, to-morrow I must tell her."

But he felt for the moment like a man who had been through the fires of hell, and who was now restored to the middle world, the clean sweet earth, and given a chance to live and breathe again. He drew in the perfumed air and squared his shoulders.

"To-morrow I will try to tell her," he amended.

CHAPTER II

“WHERE IS YOUR TO-MORROW?”

BUT to-morrow, when it merged into to-day, blue, dancing, sunfilled, did not bring the revelation of the truth to Ivors' lips.

Hesper was so radiant when they met, so beautiful, so happy, with gay carnations stuck in her belt, and a holiday air which no man, especially one who loved her as he did, could do anything to spoil, that he was tongue-tied upon the one essential subject.

Without strenuous effort he cast the thought from him, and made holiday with her. She knew an enchanting nook among the rocks beyond the Piccola Marina—a little cove spread with silver sand and lipped by blue, crested waves. The *padrona* had put up luncheon for them—chicken, and rolls, and fruit, and wine—they would have a dream-day, she asserted, a day quite good enough to be true.

Who could have the heart to quench such delicious happiness? Not a man of Ivors' temperament.

He laughed, he responded to her lightest change of mood, as her steps had responded to his in that forgotten dance: he even teased her a little. To think that she was here to-day within touch, that he could have the incredible audacity to tease her, while this time yesterday he had been eating heart and soul out

for lack of her! The Fates had provided a feast for him: they should find him no churlish guest.

Once Hesper spoke of Hildred.

"Do you think she will be pleased?" she asked wistfully.

Ivors lay on the sand beside her, with his hat tilted over his eyes.

"Pleased at what?" he enquired unnecessarily.

"Pleased to hear about—us," she answered. "I think—I hope—she will. I am very fond of Hildred. We drew rather close to each other that last month at Assuan."

Ivors cleared his throat. "I am sure she would be very pleased," he lied sturdily, "if she knew."

Hesper looked at him in some surprise. "Why if? Are you not going to tell her?"

Ivors turned over and rested his face against her knee: he did not want to look in her eyes at that moment.

"I—of course—if you wish it," he began. Then he plunged into halting, awkward speech.

"Beloved, I—we—I have had so little real happiness that I—thought—I hoped—Lord! why am I so like a stammering schoolboy?" He stopped, torn with the need of her, knowing his weakness, hating himself for lying to her, yet desiring her above all things in heaven or earth.

"What is it, dearest?" she asked softly, caressing his bent head.

The touch soothed him, as contact with her always did.

"You have healing fingers, Hesper Belhasard," he

said, kissing them. "What I would say is only this. Can we not keep this happiness, this wonderful precious thing to ourselves for the present? We are rather derelict, you and I. There is no one who really needs us but each other."

What could she say? His words touched truth and woke a feeling too deep for speech. They had only each other, but it was a possession that meant happiness. Her eyes filled and she pressed Ivors' head closer against her knee.

At last she found words.

"Yes," she said very softly. "It shall be as you wish. There is no one who need know. The Nugents are going to Japan; my relations never write to me. Hildred is busy and happy, but not so happy as I. Oh, no one in the wide world could possibly be as happy as I am! My dear! My dearest!"

He caught her hand in his and held it over his eyes. He felt humble yet radiant—a king among men, yet a slave who was unworthy to kiss her feet. He made a final tentative effort.

"Don't think me a conceited ass, Hesper," he said, with some hesitation, "but would it—hurt you very much if—if we had to part again?"

Hesper's eyes darkened with pain as fear clutched at her heart. Her face grew white under the pang of the piercing suggestion. She had no conception of the issues involved: she only thought of the past suffering which had merged into these hours of ecstasy, and all her womanhood shrank from the thought of its repetition. It was the flesh which answered rather than the spirit.

"I think—I should die," she whispered. Then turning away, her voice choked, "Of course if—if you don't want me——"

In a moment Ivors was on his knees beside her, holding her to him with that clasp of fierce defiance.

"My beloved! My soul! My white star! Of course I want you more than anything in heaven or earth. Every fibre of me cries out for you. My own. My own."

"You shouldn't frighten me so," she said at last. "Let us be happy while we know we are happy. Don't let us do anything to spoil it. Outside things may happen, but we——"

"Things shan't happen. You are mine and I am yours, and no one shall separate us now."

The scales went down. Ivors had made his choice. He would carry this through, come what might. He was no murderer to kill the thing he loved: he was never one to deny the joy of life to any. He persuaded himself that he was doing Harriet no moral wrong; that she had never been a true wife to him seemed now an inverted reason in favour of his action. He loved, he adored Hesper: in her he found his fullest complement. Why should he slay this late-found perfect happiness? Rapidly his mind ran over the arguments with which men in his case have dulled reason and stifled conscience, ending up with the inevitable justification: "In the eyes of God we shall be man and wife."

He threw all qualms behind him, and rose to the crest of this wave of joy. He was his gayest, most charming self, surrounding the woman he loved with

little tendernesses, with new felicitous ways of making love, with innumerable delicate means of showing her what she really was to him. He soothed her fears and healed the hurts which he himself had made, and through it all asked, asked, asked out of the abundance of Hesper's warm generous nature. He could never ask too much.

Day by day they discovered new sympathies in each other, new shades of character, new mutual meeting-places. She laughed at him for his petulances, he teased her about her swift withdrawals.

"Into your shell like a snail the moment I come too near!" he said once.

"Ah, you never come too near really," she answered caressingly. "That was in the dark past. I could say anything, almost, to you now. Isn't it odd how much more intimately one can talk to a man than to a woman about most things?"

"Not to *a* man, to *the* man," returned Ivors quickly.

"Ah, yes, that's it. You always express what I feel but can't say."

"My gift of words," he said half-lightly, half-bitterly, "has been a useful cloak to me. I now spread it in homage beneath your feet."

"What did it cover?" she asked softly. "Tell me, lest I should tread too heavily upon it."

"Pain and pleasure, disappointment and, lately, misery."

"Ah, but that was in the dark past," she coaxed. "We have agreed to let that medieval time remain in oblivion."

"As much as we can," he agreed, "but the past, dark or otherwise, has an ugly knack of poking its head up when you least expect it."

Hesper gave a little shiver. "You make me think of a snake."

He drew her closer to him. "Was there ever a garden of Eden without its serpent? We must be historically correct, my Eve. We can't expect everything, you know."

"We have everything, I think," she said with a happy little laugh. "There is no flaw in my 'ship of amber.' It is as clear as—as clear as——"

"Butter," he suggested. "There is a wealth of suggestion in that image if you are only able to delve deep enough for it."

"One needn't delve deep into butter," she said, crinkling up her eyes at him. "It's the same all the way through!"

"That's more than you are," he answered, with a swift flight from the general to the particular. "Every day I discover something new in you. Do you know, Hesper Belhasard, that you are the most absolutely delicious, exquisite, tantalising, satisfying, adorable creature that ever trod this unworthy earth?"

"Oh, hush, hush!" It was to be noted that the mild protest came after the assertion. The words rang bells of melody in Hesper's heart. She loved to hear them, but discounted their extravagance as tinged with the glamour of love.

"You'll find some day that your swan is a goose," she murmured.

"Oh, no," he returned unexpectedly. "I knew it

was a goose all the time. No one but a goose would ever have cared so much about me ! ”

They made plans and unmade them, which is an altogether delightful thing to do when only two people in absolute accord are concerned. Ivors was to show her all his favourite haunts : they were to drift at will to all the lovely half-forgotten places he knew of : he was to paint dreams and she was to live them. They were to have an idyll without end. They had left out of their quest the little Green Bird who knows everything and contented themselves with having captured the Blue Bird of Happiness, whose eyes they had dazzled with the Love-colour.

No beaten track should ring with their tread : they spoke of Dalmatia, and some little-known islands beyond Venice, and one day, to crown their imaginings, came a much-addressed letter to Ivors.

It was from the Austrian Count with whom he had stayed in Egypt. Its purport was brief. His wife was ill, and Egyptian air was, for her, anathema, therefore he offered the use of the island, Gezîret-el-Saâda, with all the appurtenances thereof, to Ivors for the whole or part of the ensuing winter.

He handed the letter to Hesper, and watched her face while she read it.

“ Are we living in a fairy-tale ? ” she cried. “ Or do these things really happen ? ”

“ Shall I kiss you to see if you’re awake ? ” he asked.

“ I don’t think that would wake me.”

“ Beloved goose ! I always wanted to show you

that island. You haunted it when I was there. I was always picturing you in the different places until I was nearly mad. Then I fled again."

"And all the time you had only to ask——"

Ivors winced. "I—I——" he began.

She touched his cheek with the back of her hand. "I'm sorry. I forgot that we had agreed not to talk of that dreadful time. At any rate we are together now, and incredible doors of delight seem to be opening for us. Oh, my dearest, what a beautiful wedding-present!"

Ivors drew her to him in a passion of gratitude for the delicate reticence which neither peeped nor probed. A lesser woman would have queried and commented, and would have evoked lying with which to parry her: but with Hesper, save for the one great denial, a lie was scarcely ever necessary, and Ivors hated lying. From the depths of her own privacy she respected his, and she took the gift of love as well as gave it with both hands. She was unquestioningly happy, and this boon of the island, where their idyll might continue in its heaven-sent withdrawal, seemed to set the crown and seal upon their joy.

"I helped them to design and arrange it," Ivors was saying. "It is an exquisite place, but they were tiring of it even last year. I think the disease from which Madame la Comtesse suffers is boredom—one of the worst diseases, beloved, for it takes all the savour out of life and opens the door to old age."

"We'll keep it shut as long as we can."

"If you wish to keep young desire the unattainable."

When one ceases to want anything one sinks into sluggish age."

"And you?"

"I want you."

"But——"

"I shall never really have you. Your spirit, some essence, let's call it your soul, will always elude me. That's as it should be, though. Don't give me your soul, Hesper. If you did I believe the little spark of good that may be in me would die."

"My dearest——"

"You don't understand me. You think I am talking mad nonsense. Perhaps I am, but I mean it," he said half-seriously, half-whimsically. "Remember, Hesper Belhasard, that you are my *fixéd* star. You must never cease to shine or else——"

"Or else?"

"I should sit in outer darkness," he answered. Then in a lighter tone: "You see I must at all costs preserve my youth. You have the advantage of me by a decade or so in years, and half a lifetime in lightness of heart. I am going to school to you presently. Will you teach me some of the heavenly arts you know yourself?"

"I can only teach you one thing."

"What is that?"

"How much I love you."

CHAPTER III

THE FRINGE OF THE DESERT

IT was with a sense of excited anticipation that Ivors found himself on board the steamer which was to take him to Naples to arrange the preliminaries for what he euphemistically called their marriage.

It was a day of glamour—a day of soft sea-mists, which drew away and descended again, giving magical glimpses of blue sea and hill-crested island, of purple headland and rocky coast-line in their sun-shot withdrawals.

There were several tourists on the steamer, and at first Ivors looked at them with that newly-captured interest in his fellow-creatures which was another of the gifts of Hesper's bestowal.

He watched with amusement a sharp-eyed, rat-like vendor of real tortoiseshell and imitation pink coral who squatted at the feet of a comely American lady, and hypnotised her into buying several articles which she did not in the least want. He noted the antics of a little brown-faced man who sold postcards and tiny books of views for a penny, and smiled at him as he pranced up and down the deck, spraying out the views like *serpentins* at Carnival time, crying, "Only penny! *Piccola moneta, signori! Piccola moneta!*"

When the band of musicians broke into "*Addio,*

bella Napoli!” and “*Sole mio*” he felt that the sweet hackneyed strains were in tune with his mood ; and he almost laughed aloud at the disgusted faces of a party of British tourists (of a type which he had not believed to exist outside the pages of the comic press), at a gay little incident which occurred just after the steamer left the villa-crowned, warm-tinted cliffs of Sorrento.

The musicians struck up a *tarantella*, and the fat little man who had gaily striven to sell copies of their music to the passengers put down his bundle and began to dance. Opposite to where he pirouetted sat an elderly Italian gentleman with white waxed moustache and dignified mien. His feet began to tap upon the boards, his head to nod in time to the irresistible measure. Finally he could withstand the temptation no longer, and he jumped to his feet, taking off his hat to the dancer with a grandiloquent flourish. Picking up the tails of his frock-coat he pirouetted as merrily and as extravagantly as the other had done, and the white-haired enthusiasts quickened their paces and flung themselves into the abandon of the gradually increasing *tempo* with the ardour of youth itself, until, with their final bows and flourishes, the music came to its wild climax, and the dancers sank exhausted upon the seats.

Ivors joined in the applause that followed, thinking how Hesper would have enjoyed the little incident, so typical of the light-hearted and unselfconscious Southerners. He pressed a coin into the fat man's hand as he walked to the side of the steamer to look back at Capri where his heart was—Capri, now but an amethyst blur in the pale sea-mist. On the seat near him sat a young German honeymoon couple. The bride-

groom was tall, plain, sandy-haired, and obviously sick with love. The little dark bride was plump and bright-eyed. She was not the one who kissed, Ivors thought ; it was she, rather, who gave the cheek, and would permanently hold the sceptre in the firm little red hands which the bridegroom from time to time openly fondled. They had bought oranges at Capri, which they now shared in childishly unembarrassed fashion. At another time Ivors would have shrugged his shoulders at the little scene, if he had condescended to notice it at all, but to-day, common-place and bourgeois as the couple were, something radiated from them which was neither the one nor the other. Wedding rings gleamed upon the hands of each : rings which had a meaning and a symbolism which suddenly sent a sick wave of realisation through Ivors. What these two were to each other Hesper and he could never be in the eyes of the world.

In a flash of despair some inkling of the baseness of what he contemplated touched him.

Gone was the gaiety of the life around him ; the fast dispersing mists disclosed no magic city ; the majesty of Vesuvius, brooding like Fate over the circling bay, was lost to his darkened vision. Into his innermost being he peered, and shrank back aghast from what he saw therein. He had never probed the realities of the situation before, had never fully considered it in its truer, deeper aspects. He had but skirted it. Now he stood on the fringe of the desert, as it were—the fringe where the tragedy of lovers begins or ends—the halting-place between the wells and pomegranates of the oasis and the barren sandy wastes.

He had to face the fact that he was going to commit a crime in marrying Hesper, a crime for which men were imprisoned for long, bleak, cruel years. It was the personal aspect which at first smote him. Then, as the veil in which he had enwrapped his actions was slowly drawn aside, his imagination, which he had often deemed more foe than friend, painted in vivid colours the wrong he contemplated towards the three women whose lives were entangled with his.

First, Hesper, Hesper. His heart was wrung at the very thought of her and all that she meant to him. Now that he knew something of her ideals and aspirations, of the heights and the depths of her nature and character, he realised what a terrible risk he was running if he carried out this bigamous marriage; he saw, as he had never seen before, how he was endangering her self-respect, her love for him, and her happiness as well as his own. He saw that such a blow would smite the very foundations of her being, and groaned in spirit as he sought for sophistries with which to bandage his eyes from the sight.

Hesper. No, Hesper did not bear thinking of as yet, for with the vision of her came his own need, crying an exceeding bitter cry, a call from soul to soul.

He stumbled, unseeing, down the ship's ladder into the boat which took him ashore, giving the boatman a fee which made him open his black eyes in wonder, and strode along the quays, driven by the torments which pursued him.

He wandered through the steep fishing quarter of the town, up narrow streets where the strings of drying garments fluttered overhead like faded banners, where

the shaggy fawn goats came in from the country, and climbed to the top of flights of steps to be milked.

On he wandered, not knowing or caring where he went, heeding nothing save the fact that some power stronger than himself drove him forth, and prevented him from seeking the Consulate until he had for once pondered truly upon the consequences of his action.

He thought of Hildred and the wrong he contemplated doing her. He knew that if he did this thing sooner or later his sin must find him out, and the thought of the scorn in those clear grey eyes whipped him like a lash. In a flash of self-exculpation he cried to the accusing vision :

“ It is your fault as well as mine. If you had stayed with me this never could have happened.”

True. Hildred could not cast the first stone. She had left him in his need : she had deserted him when her woman’s intuition should have warned her that he wanted her, that she alone could save him.

But who was he to reproach her ? What had he done for this child of his ? Had he ever loved her, studied her, made her necessary to him, made himself necessary to her as a father should ? How had he ever strengthened this reed that it should not break when he leant upon it ? If, in breaking, it pierced him as well, the fault was not hers but his.

Oh, Hesper ! Hesper !

If he could creep to her feet and cry “ Peccavi ! ” If he could be lifted up and forgiven, and rest his head upon the softness of her breast ! At the thought a wave of longing shook him.

People in the street, sauntering along in the easy

Neapolitan fashion, turned to look at the thin, white-faced man who strode past as if he did not know where he was going.

It was true. He neither knew nor cared, driven as he was by whips of despair, tormented by the conflict within him. Of his wife and his sin against her he thought but little. He owed her nothing, he told himself. She had cast him off for no real reason in the heyday of his manhood, had cut him adrift from all anchorage of home and wife and child, uncaring whether he lived or died or came to ruin. He owed her nothing. Any fault of his was condoned by the fact that she had sinned against him so deeply. Although their wedded life had drifted quickly into the prosaic stage its ending had been none of his doing. He would have gone on as they had been going without a thought of more than the inevitable mental severance. No, it was not for Harriet to cast the first stone either.

Then, by some subconscious reasoning, he thought of her for whom that kindly plea—"Let him that is without sin among you cast the first stone,"—had first been uttered, by Whom it had been said and why, and it came to him that if Hesper should stand one day before such a tribunal it was he who would have dragged her there, without her knowledge.

Without her knowledge. Ah, there lay the sting. He would smirch her white purity, drag her down in the eyes of men, stab her treacherously in the dark, and all because he loved her. How he loved her, and craved for her and needed her! If he could believe that she would have the courage to brave convention and come away with him he would tell her all, he would

risk her scorn and trust to the warmth of her love. But he could not be sure. That was the crux. For all her maturity she had the innocent heart of a child, and he could picture her wounded wonder at his deception, her hurt surprise at the baseness of his passion. He dared not risk it.

At last he found that he had stopped on the top of a hill, driven to pause for breath. He looked around him. Far below lay the great semicircle of the bay, shimmering in the sunshine which, in dispersing the mists, had touched the long ripples of the water with a luminous sheen.

Capri was scarcely visible on the horizon, and gardens rioting with geraniums and roses tumbled precipitously beneath him to the water's edge. Villas, embowered in orchards and olive-trees, were dotted about the hillside, and a great pine in the grounds of the nearest one was etched darkly against the gleaming bay. The city curved away to the left in a golden haze.

Above him a building struck an incongruous note in his surroundings. It was a pseudo-Egyptian temple built of rough grey stone, carving and symbol here colourless as his life seemed to be at present.

His lips twisted themselves into a wry smile at the sight. How the Egyptian temples seemed to intrude into the critical moments of his life! He thought of the delicate colonnades at Kôm Ombo, the broken cornices against the blue sky, the shimmering loveliness of the scene from the bluff on that other day when the hoopoe had come like a messenger of Fate. At Kôm Ombo he had found and lost the Love-colour and his heart for ever, as he had then thought.

Now the Fates had led his steps to Capri and Hesper. What portent had the rough grey travesty of colour-filled loveliness for him to-day?

No one was near at the moment. He tried the gate leading to the mock temple, but it was locked. Stones jutted from the wall here and there. He climbed it easily, and seeking a corner of the steps where he could not be seen from the road he sat down, conscious now of an overpowering weariness, to fight his battle with himself. Here at least he would be undisturbed for the present: here he could think, could break away from the magic of Hesper's presence.

He pressed his hands over his eyes, and tried to summon his forces. Thoughts, wild and incoherent, rushed in a tumult through his mind. At Kôm Ombo he had determined to seek safety in flight. What if that were the only way of redemption here? Had he the courage to flee from Naples without ever seeing Hesper again? It seemed as if every drop of blood ebbed from his heart at the thought, as if life slowly left him to the chill of such a death. No, a thousand times no! He *must* see Hesper again, he could not live without her. Then why not die? Of what use was he to any one else? Ah, there was his reason for not taking the coward's way. The blood ran warmly in his veins again. Hesper had said that she would die if he left her. The dear specious argument rang in his ears once more. She would die: his best beloved, his fixed star, and he would have killed her. How could he slay her late-found joy? Why should they not take what they had won so hardly? But what does the body matter if you kill the soul? Kill

the soul? He was not sure that he had a soul. Kill Hesper's soul? How could he kill Hesper's soul, if they were man and wife in God's sight? He was not certain that there was a God. He would cleave only to her, forsaking all other. She wanted no other. He was her world as she was his. They were all in all to each other in a sense attained by few. Why should he fling this gift into the sea of oblivion and flee? He would never let Hesper suffer, he would shield her with his life if necessary, but he would not give her up, he could not. The sin would be his alone. How could it mar her whiteness? A few more lies, and Ivors hated lying, and the deed would be done. It would be his burnt-offering to the Fates; its smoke would trouble him no more, and they could be happy. Ah, how happy!

Hesper! Hesper!

But when she knew some day, as she must inevitably know, what of this rainbow palace of happiness? Would it not burst like a bubble and leave nothing behind? Would she not have a thousand-fold more to forgive then than now? Now the bitterness would be clean save for the mire of his deception, which she could wash away with her tears; but then—then——

Ivors groaned aloud as the day sank to its close, and the maze of wild thoughts, weak excuses, pagan impulses spun bewilderingly through his tortured mind. The scales moved so rapidly, one weighty reason against another sending the balance up and down with so dizzy a motion that all power of judgment seemed suspended.

When at last he rose he staggered like a man who had been through an illness, and saw to his surprise that

the sun had sunk below the far horizon and that dusk was coming, velvet-footed, through the orchards. It was too late for action that day, he realised with a sigh of relief, as he walked down the hill towards Naples.

But in his inmost soul two emotions were paramount, a sick craving for the sight and touch of Hesper and the shamefaced knowledge that, come what might, he would stand on the fringe of the desert no longer. He had had enough of the sandy wastes, the arid desolation. The palm-trees, the wells, and the pomegranates were in sight, within touch. A man were worse than mad if he turned from them to go back to the wilderness to die of thirst and loneliness. He had been there: he knew. In the face of such knowledge was he to thrust Hesper also into the wastes? Oh, the cooling wells!

It was too late to return to Capri that night. She would not be uneasy: he had told her that he might be detained, but the long dull evening gave him a fore-taste of what life would be again without her, and his broken sleep was haunted by horrible fragments of dreams—vague, inestimable losses—tragedies that awakened him to find his cheeks wet with tears, and kept him tossing and tumbling until dawn broke, and he arose and went out to inhale the fresh sea air and to listen to the homely jingling noises of the waking city.

He sent his spirit in longing towards the faint blur that was Capri, and at the earliest possible hour sought out the British Consulate, and made therein his burnt-offering of treachery and sin, blinding himself deliberately to the fact that in its smoke might be consumed Hesper's happiness and his, and those deeper things which are more precious than either.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAGIC CIRCLE

WHEN Ivors returned from Naples he brought letters from the poste restante for them both.

His was from Hildred, ardent and thought-provoking. She was fired with enthusiasm for her work, found no detail too small, no task too irksome for pleased fulfilment. Mrs. Marston, the matron, was a strict disciplinarian, but so kind, and the nurses were all ladies, and more or less congenial. Her mother had neither approved nor disapproved, but had stated candidly that in her opinion the aim and object of all hospital nurses was to get married, but that she supposed that it was only one of Nature's tricks to enable the world to continue to go round! However, Hildred did not mind. She had found a niche: she had something to do: she felt that she was of some small use in the world: that here she was really wanted. She did not mention Dr. Lisle. She concluded by asking him to write to her sometimes—"and remember that if you ever need me I am quite ready and willing to go to you. If you should chance to come across Miss Marlowe please give her my love, but I suppose you are not at all likely to be anywhere that she is."

Ivors looked at Hesper with a sigh at the thought of what he had been through. They were sitting on the terrace above the peach-orchard : she was in the little arbour and he sat on a stool with his back against the vine-trellis. *Not likely to be anywhere that she was ?* He looked with yearning at the down-bent head, with its classic waves of soft black hair, at the drooped white lids, at the sweet generous mouth, at the firm chin with its hinted dimples, at the slim hands which held his heart, at the beautiful sweeping line of her figure, and hoped passionately that he was never likely to be anywhere but where she was ! Give her up ? Not for twenty thousand scruples ! Besides, it was for her happiness as well as his. Had she not said that to lose him now would kill her ? Yet, as he looked at her, the essence of her personality stole over him again and whispered that here was no weak thing of apathetic resignation to the blows of circumstance. Some lines he had once read pricked uneasily through his deliberately narcotised conscience—

“ Yet each man kills the thing he loves.
By each let this be heard ;
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword ! ”

Was his the coward's way of killing ? he wondered.

He rose suddenly, went to her and kissed her, and the touch of her lips put to flight all considerations but the thought of her desirability and of his great love and need of her. Hildred had spoken of being needed : if that were the claim of womanhood Hesper should have hers fulfilled in good measure, pressed

down and running over. No human being ever needed another as he needed her, he told himself, and she needed him too, in very deed and truth. He kissed her again.

"Beloved, how I have wanted you!" he said.

"Yesterday?" she asked, leaning back against his shoulder, and letting her letters fall into her lap.

"Since the beginning of Time."

"The hours crawled without you. The sun seemed to stand still. I wanted you horribly."

"We were created for each other, Hesper," he said huskily. "See how we were brought together after all these empty years."

"These empty years," she echoed, looking back at a barren vista that ended at her eighteenth birthday.

"The days of fulness are at hand," he continued. "We are meant to have them, clearly meant to have them."

She did not understand his insistence, but anything that breathed of his love was sweet to her.

"Surely," she answered. "I often think that things are more equally divided than people imagine. The balance of the scales is always tolerably even, and though the sorrowful side may overbalance sometimes, the turn of the joyful is sure to come sooner or later."

"Oh, sweet heart full of happy and lovely thoughts," he cried. "What have I done to deserve you?"

"Don't be foolish," whispered Hesper, turning and kissing the hand that clasped her shoulder. "Haven't you just said that we were created for each other, so that there can be no question of desert or non-

desert?" Then, after a little: "I have had a letter from Nanno, who says that her poor old mother is still alive 'although they have had the priest and the doctor to her,' but that when the poor old soul is 'waked' and buried she will come to me, no matter what outlandish place I'm in. Also, she tells me a piece of news—that Belhasard—my godmother"—she put in smiling—"is to be sold, and that she wishes to goodness I'd buy it and marry a nice gentleman and settle down there! What do you think, Ingram?" she laughed softly. "It is a dear old place, with quaint rooms and passages, and the sweetest little morning-room down three steps, which opens on to a closed rose-garden with a fountain in the centre where goldfish used to live. Shall we buy it and make it our permanent home? I think my darling daddy would be very happy if he could know that you and I were there."

Ivors stroked her hair. "It shall be just as you like, beloved."

"How pleased Nanno will be when she hears that we are going to be married! She thought you were a darlin' gentleman, God bless you, and too fine a man entirely to be fiddlin' about all day with them paints! Like most people in Ireland, gentle and simple, she considers spinsterhood a stigma. It will delight her good heart when she hears that it is to be removed from me."

Ivors thought for a moment. Here was a simple way of pleasing her, and one comparatively unfraught with danger. It was not likely that Nanno's knowledge could make mischief,

"You may tell her if you like," he said, "but ask her not to gossip about it."

"Oh, thank you, dearest," she exclaimed, pleased as a child. "Nanno won't gossip. She can keep her counsel as well as any one I know. Now if we could only tell Hildred and the Nugents I should be perfectly happy."

Ivors frowned a little, and moved uneasily. "I did not think that you were the conventional woman who wants all her friends to know of her capture," he said petulantly.

"But I'm not, you misunderstand me," she answered, drawing back slightly. A faint colour flushed her cheeks. "I confess, Ingram, that I did not think you were capable of such a—such a—yes, I *will* say it—vulgar insinuation."

Ivors laughed, and caught her hands, all his irritation banished by the sparkle of her eyes. "Forgive me, dearest of all things. I love teasing you."

"Are you sure you were only teasing? Are you sure that you didn't mean that horrid thing?"

"Of course I didn't, goose." Then he added with a sigh that melted the last icicle of Hesper's aloofness, "Do you think for an instant that I am so fatuous as to imagine myself a capture of whom any woman could be proud?"

"That's fishing," she said, "and all your life long you've had more compliments than were good for you."

"They were Dead Sea fruit. Give me a bite of your Apple of Common-Sense."

"I'm afraid I can't spare any. Besides, if I did,

you'd probably turn round later on, like Adam, and say that I tempted you."

"And haven't you?"

"To what have I tempted you, may I ask?"

"To loving you more than is good for my soul, I'm afraid," he said, walking to the edge of the terrace and looking down at the amazing blueness of the sea.

She rose too and followed him, slipping her hand through his arm.

"No, beloved. No, Ingram. You mustn't say that. You must unsay it now this very moment."

"How can one unsay what one has already said? Scientists tell us that sound never dies, so, according to them, my careless words will go echoing through æons of time, if not eternity."

"Were they careless?"

"Execrably so."

"Did you mean them?"

"Sweetest heart!"

"Did you mean them at all, Ingram?" She rubbed her cheek coaxingly against his shoulder, and her tone rang wistfully.

He answered her with the fierceness to which something in the high mettle of her nature responded. "How could I mean them? How could my love for you be anything but the best part of me, the one spark of light in my whole careless, selfish life?" He kissed her hair and eyes.

"The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword."

The words rang through his brain, but he only held her the closer.

"Now tell me your reasons for letting the world into our secret, Hesper Belhasard."

"It's not the world, it's only the Nugents and Hildred."

"Let's take the Nugents first."

"They are my very good friends, and I would like them to share my happiness. Besides, I've just had a letter from Gerda, who, in her usual frank way, criticised you! She would not dare to do that if she knew what we were to each other."

Ivors laughed. "What did she say?"

"Oh, I don't think she'd like me to tell."

"Very well, then, goose. But don't imagine for an instant that I care a *centesimo* what any one but you thinks or says about me. That disposes of the Nugents."

"Does it?"

"Now for Hildred."

She drew his face closer to hers and spoke very low. "It's only, it's only that we two are so happy, and she is outside. There are only the three of us, you and she and I. Why shouldn't we bind our little circle as closely together as possible? I don't think she'd resent it," Hesper continued diffidently. Ivors' clasp tightened. "I think she really liked me, and I am very fond of her. We got to know each other better that last month at Assuan. I wish you would tell her."

"By the way, who was the young man who wouldn't take no for an answer?"

"It was Roddy. Didn't you know? Foolish boy, his persistence drove her away."

"What do these children know of love?"

"Ah, what?" sighed Hesper, with the inevitable assurance of all lovers since the world began that they, the man and woman in the eternal love-cycle, are the only two who know the real meaning of that encyclopædic monosyllable.

"And what about your Baron?" Ivors asked after a pause.

"Ah, he was a pleasant creature, but very sentimental."

"How I wish I had known!"

"Known what?"

"Your opinion of him. I should never have been jealous of a pleasant creature."

"And were you jealous?"

"Fiendishly."

"You needn't have been. There was never any one else," she said simply.

"Since Time began?"

"Since Time began." Then: "Well, what about Hildred?"

Ivors was brought back to the present with a jar. Her insistence fretted him, but he was ashamed of his former irritability. He could have laughed aloud at the bitter irony of life. Here he had to deny her the one thing he most wished for himself. He would have given a great deal if he could have stood forth and boldly proclaimed Hesper his wife in the face of the world. He gloried in her love for him, in his for her, and yet he had, perforce, to deny her, to hide her away in the forgotten corners of the world. He had deliberately shut his eyes to any other alternative; their feet

were set now on a path from which there must be no turning back. They were leaving the fringe of the desert: the cool wells and the pomegranates were before them, the wastes lay behind. He could not close his ears to the clanking of his fetters, but he would do his best to prevent Hesper from hearing it too. He scarcely realised how oblivious she was of the mundane just now, how closely attuned were all her senses to the hearing of the music of the spheres.

"We're in a magic circle of our own, beloved," he whispered. "I don't want to let any one else in just yet. Won't you wait? Some day——"

"Some day," she echoed, "is no day. But never mind! I don't want any one but you, I assure you. I am looking forward with all my heart to our wanderings, and then to our winter in that Arabian-Nights-like island."

"It *is* like the Arabian Nights. You will love it, with its silent-footed servants, and its garden and its big, cool rooms full of beauty and mystery, and the flat roof on which you can sleep if you like, with nothing but the whispering wind between you and the stars."

"It sounds enchanting," she murmured.

"You won't be lonely there? We don't want people, do we?"

"People? 'And thou beside me singing in the wilderness'? " she quoted with a fine scorn.

Ivors was silent. Sometimes the fire of joy burns fiercely and scorches those who come too near.

"The only thing about it that I don't like," continued Hesper, "is its name. It seems like tempting Fate to call a place the Island of Happiness."

"It was their naming, not ours," said Ivors quickly.

"I know, but I feel as if we have had too much ourselves already, somehow; as if we ought to do something to propitiate the gods, like that king of old who threw his ring into the sea."

"Don't worry. I've made a burnt-offering already," Ivors said, unthinking. Then in a lighter tone: "You little pagan, are you superstitious?"

Hesper laughed. "Not really, though I suppose all Irish people are tinged with superstition, more or less. What's your burnt-offering?"

Ivors evaded answering. "Hildred told me that you once enlightened her on the great differences between English and Irish people. I wish you'd tell me some."

"Well, the English pronounce grass——" she began.

"I don't mean differences in pronunciation, you find those in every English county, but something more fundamental, more racial."

Hesper pondered. "Well, really at the moment the only thing I can think of is that the English never say 'God bless you' when you sneeze!"

Ivors burst out laughing. "Oh, you dearest!" he cried. "Life with you should be one long delight."

"And why not?" asked Hesper Belhasard, as she winked away a tear of happiness which fell on Ivors' coat.

CHAPTER V

GEZÎRET-EL-SÂADA

AFTER their marriage, which no thunderbolt of circumstance prevented, they journeyed to Egypt by circuitous ways. Indeed, no one who noted the involutions of their wanderings would ever have imagined that their faces were set, even in thought, towards that land of dead kings and living peasants.

Avoiding the beaten track, they met no old acquaintances and made few new ones. They were content with one another, and as each day progressed to its close they drew more closely together in sympathy and spirit, their need of each other increasing rather than diminishing with time.

Hesper's beauty grew and deepened. It lost the touch of coldness which had appeared a flaw to some, a charm to others. The inner radiance which before had been but evanescent now shone through her every look.

Ivors changed too, but with a difference. He grew thinner, and his temples were touched with grey. Hesper thought it added to his look of distinction. She liked men to be of "the lean kine," she said, unwitting of what had worn him. It seemed almost as if the fire of happiness which irradiated her were

slowly consuming him, as if his overmastering passion were too strong for the frame which leashed it. He alternated fitful outbursts of energy with periods of inactive reaction, and although he determinedly never looked back, the daily revelation of the depths and heights of Hesper's love, her inner purity and the sweetness of her soul, stung him from time to time with a burning sense of the wrong which he had done her. Still, he tasted happiness, holding what he had taken with all the defiance of conscious possession, and striving daily with every art in his power to grapple her to him "with hooks of steel" which should hold fast when the inevitable cataclysm came. For that it was inevitable, sooner or later, Ivors knew in the depths of his being; and he wrought to make himself so necessary to Hesper that no knowledge, however bitter or shameful, could bring about separation. That was what he dreaded most of all—that she should leave him. He could not face the loneliness of life without her again. These two solitary creatures whom Destiny had brought together clung all the more closely on account of the long empty years they had spent apart. The Hesper whom Ivors knew was a being no one else had ever seen, and the Ingram of her love was a man whom neither friend nor enemy would have even dimly recognised, for he, like most men, boasted,

" . . . two soul-sides, one to face the world with,
One to show a woman when he loves her !"

It was with a sense of home-coming that Hesper saw Egypt again, though anything which opposed more contrast to that sun-baked country than her own land

of mist-haunted hills and purple heather could scarcely be imagined. Its indefinable charm drew her, enveloped her as it had done before, and Ivors was content in her content.

They did not linger on the way : they were anxious to get to El-Saâda ; and the faithful Moussa, who met them in Cairo, and kissed Hesper's hand with the grace of a courtier, had made all the necessary arrangements for their arrival.

They went by train, and Hesper saw familiar sights from a different aspect, travelling in a few hours through the variations of colour and costume which had meant weeks of experience on the slower water-way.

When the square-topped colonnade of the Temple of Kôm Ombo came in sight, she slipped her hand into Ivors' and smiled at him, touching the enamelled sun-disc which spread its tinted wings across the lace at her throat.

" Do you remember ? " she asked, past pain obliterated in the sweetness of the present.

" I remember," answered Ivors, thinking of all that had happened in the few brief months that held the greatest moments of his life. In a flash he saw the mock temple at Naples, and felt again for an instant the bitterness of his struggle.

The curving cornice and the great pillars stood out for a moment against the blue like a cameo of clouded amber upon turquoise, then disappeared from sight.

" We must go there again some day," he said, rousing himself with an effort. " Perhaps the hoopoe——"

" Has gone back to Balkis, Queen of Sheba."

" Or more probably is nesting in one of the clefts

above the old gods—the falcon-headed Haroëris or the ibis-headed Thout. Isn't it odd how those old sculptors managed to invest their animal-headed gods with dignity? And the fellows had no idea of perspective either, or of any way of presenting the figure except in profile. They ought to look ridiculous, grotesque, but they don't, somehow. I wonder why?"

"It's because they are in their proper environment," Hesper answered dreamily. "Incongruity only means wrong surroundings. Look at those men working that *shadûf*! With their naked bronze limbs and blue robes girt about their waists they look in perfect harmony with the sand and the palm-trees. Put them down in a London street!"

"What logic!" mocked Ivors. "You are becoming quite a dialectician, Hesper Belhasard."

"What's that?" she asked. "I am far too happy to-day to understand words of more than two syllables."

"Hell, Hope, Heaven," he murmured half to himself. "Harriet, Hildred, Hesper. All the big things in my life have begun with H. Pity I was not born a cockney!"

"H'm," said Hesper. "I didn't catch what you said."

"I said that you and Heaven began with the same letter," he answered.

"What about that for logic?" she laughed. "O my dearest, why do you love me so much?"

"I'm afraid I can't help it now. I'm a creature of habit, Hesper Belhasard," he said, kissing the hand he held, and thinking to himself, "And I can laugh,

actually laugh at these things, which are the biggest in the world to me ! What sort of worm am I, after all ? If Hesper could look into the depths of my soul what would she think of the coward and the liar that she'd see there ? ”

He shook the thought from him—the thought which, although it returned in Protean disguises, always had the power to sting and burn—and spoke of the life they would lead at El-Saâda.

“ Our home,” said Hesper softly. “ It gives me a thrill of excitement every time I think of it. You must paint it all for me, Ingram. You must paint me the Song of the Nile.”

“ And you must play it for me,” he declared, “ with the diapason of the mountains as they melt away to an amethyst diminuendo or come thundering down in a golden crescendo of towering cliff and crag ! ”

“ Now, are we talking music, painting, or nonsense ? ” asked Hesper, with a little excited laugh.

“ What does it matter ? ” said Ivors, drawing her closer.

The train swept through palm-grove and brown tilled land, through sun-dried village and tawny wastes of desert, past the ragged mat tents of the *Bisharîn* camp in the crumbling old Arab cemetery, and stopped at last at the railway-station at Assuan.

Moussa came to the carriage, resplendent in a peach-coloured *kuftân*, and opened the door with a flourish.

“ The boatmen, *o efèndi*,” he said, indicating some waiting figures who made a brilliant spot of colour on the platform.

With their black Nubian faces, their gleaming teeth,

and their costumes of red *tarbûshes*, jackets and shoes, full white trousers and deep purple waistbands, it seemed to Hesper as if they might have stepped straight out of the pages of the "Arabian Nights."

"It's beginning," she cried with a little gasp of delight. "Why, they're just like fuchsias!"

Ivors' vagrant fancy was tickled at the simile, and he ever afterwards referred to the four boatmen as "your fuchsias." The livery had been devised by the Graf von Strelitz, and its wearers had squatted for hours under the palm-trees in the dust, waiting to do honour to their new if temporary master.

Ivors remembered some of them and spoke to all. He had a way with the Arabs which resulted in excellent service; and flashing smiles now bore testimony to his popularity.

"The *felûkeh* awaits, *o efêndi*," said Ali, the chief boatman. "We will return after for the luggage. The *sitt* will walk? It is very near."

Ivors looked at Hesper. "Can you walk a hundred yards or so?" he asked. "Across the road and the sandy bank as far as old Nile?"

"I think I can," she answered gravely. Then she gave his arm a little squeeze. "Oh, Ingram, I feel as excited as a child."

The time of tourists was not yet, and the bright little town seemed half-deserted. Only a desultory vendor or two of fly-switches and bead-chains moved in the distance, and these Moussa dispersed in lordly fashion as they approached.

The *felûkeh* lay by the bank. It was gaily painted, as were all the Assuan boats, but instead of the usual

crude green and yellow and scarlet, its rudder and little railing bore the fuchsia colours, purple, crimson and white. Hesper was silent with pleasure as she stepped in and sank luxuriously on the soft red cushions.

"It's too delightful for words," she sighed, as the *felûkeh* shot out into midstream and drifted quickly down the river towards the picturesque, tree-shaded Elephantine Island.

The gay clean town rising in tiers of flat-topped houses pierced here and there by snowy minarets, the clustered palms, the avenues of *lebekh* trees, the rude ruin of Cleopatra's bath jutting out into the water, the groups of Nile-boats along the bank, all brought the desired and familiar atmosphere to the two who sat and watched it and each other with enchanted eyes.

Behind them, in odd juxtaposition, the crescent on a dome and the cross of the English church stood out upon the skyline; and the clear, delicious air brought with it a sense of exhilaration.

The *felûkeh* swung round with a jerk, and faced up the river. Ali hoisted a peaked sail and they moved slowly towards their goal; sailing against a current which had lost no strength since its waters had rushed through the sluice-gates of the great dam in foam-white torrents, thundering, iridescent, until it swirled here round the granite islets—tumbled heaps of stone, brown, reddish, purple—whose savage desolation was occasionally softened by a knot of rushes or a clump of low-growing tamarisk, or emphasised by a rude hieroglyph of god or bird cut deep upon some

large bare boulder, whose base was polished with a fine black glaze from the ceaseless eddying of the water.

To the right rose the golden hills of Libya, whose reddish spurs were clothed with sands as vivid as those of fabled Pactolus ; sands which glowed as if the molten metal had been poured over the rocky slopes, whose brilliance was accentuated by their powdering of blackened stones and the intense blueness of the sky which rose above them.

One of the boatmen struck up a song which the others accompanied with a soft clapping of hands.

"A lover said to a dove :
 'Lend me your wings for a day,
 That I may soar thro' the sky
 And see my beloved's face.
 I shall obtain enough love,
 O dove, for a year and a day.
 I will return, O dove!
 Lend me your wings for a day !' "

Ivors roughly translated the words for Hesper. The crude melody, the soft insistence of the hand-beats added the final touch to the scene.

"Sight and sound blend here as they do nowhere else," said Hesper with a sigh. "It is perfect, isn't it, dearest ? "

"I think there is something about this glowing barbarity which almost frightens me," returned Ivors slowly. "The suave beauties of Kôm Ombo and Luxor appeal to me more."

"Then why——? "

"Ah, wait until you come to El-Saâda," he answered with a smile.

They had left hotels and inhabited islands behind

them, and now came within sight of their new home, a green mass embowering a glimpse of cream. Ali leaped to lower the sail as the bow of the *felûkeh* grounded softly on a little bay of yellow sand, from which a tiny pier of polished granite blocks ran outwards into the water.

Ivors and Hesper walked up the path into a garden. Tall silvery eucalyptus and feathery pepper-trees raised their foliage against the blue. Great bushes of oleander in all gradations of colour, from white to sunset-pink, flushed the garden in masses, while poinsettias showed tongues of flame amid the green. Orange and lemon-trees glowed with their burden of fruit, and there were roses everywhere. By the side of the path they trod was a little channel paved with turquoise tiles, over which a stream of water trickled with a tiny cool murmur. Young palms clustered in corners through whose branches flitted shy, velvet-throated bulbuls with little melodious twitters. A bee-eater, like a green flash, alighted at the edge of the stream and sipped daintily.

Down an alley of oleanders came a pair of gazelles, fawn-dappled and slender, with graceful, timid movements as if inviting a greeting.

"It's too much, dearest," said Hesper with a little catch in her voice. "This is an enchanted garden, and here are the prince and princess who have been turned into gazelles. And the turquoise tiles! And surely I hear the sleepy purring creak of a *sakîyeh*. It is really too much."

"It's not half enough," said Ivors, touched at her pleasure. "The tiles were a fad of Madame's, who

had also seen them in Persia, and I am glad to see that the gazelles are still alive. They are called Anas el-Wogud and Zahr el-Ward, after a pair of lovers who lived on the Island of Philæ—Anas and Zahr for short. *Ta'âla hena, Anas. Ta'âli, Zahr.*"

He held out his hand, and the dainty creatures came a little nearer, looking at him with great dark eyes: then some movement startled them, and they turned and trotted away among the oleanders.

"I must make friends with them," said Hesper.

"That's easily done. They're really quite tame, but a little shy just now. Come! I want to show you the house."

It was a low cream-coloured structure, built in the Arab style of arched verandahs and flat-topped roof. Inside, the dim richness of Persian rugs and carpets was spread pleasantly beneath one's feet. The windows were latticed in delicate *mushrabiyieh*, and each had its softly cushioned divan. On the inlaid tables stood turquoise bowls of stiffly-arranged flowers, and against the wall at one end was a fragment of some temple nook, the golden-yellow cartouche of a king encircled by the love-colour. One end of the verandah was curtained off into a sort of loggia, and hung with gay tenting covered with crude brilliant figures of the old Egyptian deities. Here were spread divans, cushions, and all contrivances for lazy ease. One looked over its flat cream parapet at the golden hills and the river which now ran molten with the sun-rays, and caught a glimpse of a distant Nubian village with its cylindrical mud-huts and the far black silhouettes of women coming down to the water's edge.

On a divan lay a lute inlaid with silver and ebony, just as if some rose-veiled *Fatmeh* had but that moment put it down.

Ivors touched its strings softly.

"To-night when the sky is jewelled with stars as large as moons I will serenade you with this, beloved." He moved towards her and took her in his arms. "Welcome home, my sweetest heart. May your days be as white as milk."

"Ah, my man, my man," she said, resting her cheek against his.

"What a delicious voice you have, Hesper Belhasard," he said, after a little. "It is one of your chief charms. I hate loud voices, and angry voices hurt me like a blow. I think I'd do anything to avoid a scene."

"And yet one mustn't shirk," said Hesper. "Sometimes it is sheer cowardice to avoid the unpleasant."

"Are you trying to strengthen my weakness?"

"Ah, you don't want any strengthening."

"God knows I do," said Ivors with a bitter pang.

"I suppose we all do."

"I have not the strength to hurt you, beloved," he said, lulling his qualms with sophistries.

"Which means that you haven't the strength to hurt yourself," she responded, looking at him with her heart in her eyes. "For aren't you and I one?"

Her words rang uncomfortably in his ears. Was that the truth, spoken so innocently, so unwittingly? Had he been afraid of hurting himself, not her? Had he cared all the time only for the Ego which had always ruled his life?

Hesper moved to the parapet. The evening glow

encircled her, en-haloed her, Ivors thought, with a surge of passionate adoration.

"In the things that matter I hope you would have the strength to hurt me if necessary," she said, turning her head. "Nothing could hurt me so much as any failure in you."

"Hesper, I am full of flaws. For God's sake don't put me on a pedestal. Any height makes me giddy. I'd tumble at once, and you'd find your poor clay idol in pieces at your feet. I'm a bundle of faults and failings tied together with the golden thread of my love for you. It's the one good thing about me, if indeed, there is any virtue in loving 'the highest when we see it.'"

He knelt beside her and put his arms round her.

"How you exaggerate!" she said fondly.

"Lord knows I don't," he answered with a rueful sigh. Then his mood changed suddenly. He sprang up and went to the divan.

"After all, why should I wait until to-night to serenade you, my star?" he cried, snatching up the lute and tuning it.

After a soft thrumming at the strings he broke into a curious melody, and then into song. So few were the notes of the song that it almost seemed as if the words accompanied the music, but the effect was oddly passionate and pleading.

"My heart,
I would have sold it
Had it not been full of thee!

"Mine eyes,
I would have blinded them,
Had they not been illumined by the radiance of thy face!

“My soul,
I would have burned it
As a perfume at thy feet
Had it not been the breath that exhaled from thy lips!”

All the romance, all the glamour of Hesper's life were concentrated in that thin, alert figure poised on the edge of the divan, plucking the heart out of the lute, and looking at her the while with eyes that seemed to burn, so intense was the fire of their gaze. When the song ended she ran to him, and knelt by his side.

“You love me like this?” she cried, in a choked voice, answering his eyes rather than his words. “Ingram! My husband! What have I done to deserve it?”

The lute fell with a little clatter to the floor, where it lay harmoniously on the dull rose and mauve and yellow of the rug. Ivors' lips twisted into a mirthless smile over her bent head, for he knew that one of the seeds of his punishment was coming into flower, and that the fruit thereof would be exceeding bitter.

CHAPTER VI

THE GOLDEN BALL

AS the weather grew cooler and the desert air wafted draughts of exhilaration through Assuan the two on the island made many excursions.

They plunged in search of colour into the narrow covered bazaars, and found it in the gay barbarity of the Sudanese bead and leather chains, the silver and ivory amulets, the straw fans and baskets in rich tones of orange, green and magenta ; in the gourds covered with nets of blue beads ; and in the vegetable bazaar with its medley of oranges, lemons, tiny green limes, strings of dried pods, and rough earthenware bowls full of yellow millet, orange lentils, or dull green peas.

Here was a stall of weapons presided over by a dark-eyed, white-bearded Arab, who proudly wore the green turban, sign that he had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. A sense of fitness linked him with his wares—swords whose scabbards of leather, ivory or dull gold were inlaid and encrusted with garnets and turquoises, and knives with handles of carved wood or curving horn, whose sheaths of black crocodile, grey lizard-skin, or flame-coloured leather were ornamented with bits of silver, ivory or copper.

By his side a man in a dull blue robe with a tray of

brass and copper seals, poured pale amber tea into tiny handle-less cups, one of which he presented to the Mecca pilgrim.

Wild-eyed *Bisharîn* stalked through the dim covered ways, bringing, with their shaggy hair pierced with silver or ivory pins, their rough white robes, and the dagger or amulet fastened to their bare brown arms, a sense of desert wildness into this brilliant semi-civilisation.

Ivors and Hesper bargained and bought with the zest of children. He presented her with a string of turquoises, and a gay blue, green and white "*Madama Nubia*," as the Arabs call the bead, shell and leather apron which comprises the simple costume of the Sudanese women; and they gave each other amulets, little rolls of the Koran, hers encased in rose-red and turquoise leather, his more sombrely enclosed in brown and red. They were hung on long fawn leather chains, and when Ivors went to put Hesper's round her neck he found that it had become so entangled with his that he could not disengage it.

The Arab who sold them came forward with a smile.

"Let me try, *o efêndi*," he said. His slim brown fingers pushed and patted and finally disentangled the two chains. "A little patience, that is all. Every knot has an unraveller in Allah."

Ivors thanked the man and drew away, but the words lingered. Would Allah unravel his knot, he wondered, the tangled knot of his own deliberate tying? The question pursued him through the richly-coloured twilight of the bazaars, and pierced through the eager chaffering of the merchants, until, with a

fatalism born of the East, he set it aside to await its answer at the appointed time.

They spent long delightful hours in the *felûkeh*, sailing beneath the green slopes of Elephantine Island, and skirting the golden hills crowned with the ruined tomb of a *sheikh*, or breasting the current among the granite islands, watching the brown-robed Nubian women come down to the water's edge with kerosene tins poised on their heads with all the grace with which their blue-robed sisters of the Thebaid bore their grey-green water-jars. Here little children, wild as hares, would peer and chatter among the rocks, half-naked, but always with an amulet of silver or copper to glint away misfortune.

Once they went to Philæ—Philæ the beautiful, the moribund—with the crested loveliness of a colonnade lifting its head above the water which had drowned her palms and acacias, and the little kiosk richly pillared and square to the blue. The depth of the sky was reflected in the water on which the sun shone with dazzling brilliance, and the calm beauty of the ruined temple was emphasised by the wild savagery of its surroundings, the reddish-purple islands, and the fiery golden-yellow of the hills.

The sight depressed them, despite its barbaric contrast. Titans at play might have tumbled together those volcanic-looking cairns, which loomed terrifying, almost overwhelming, not because of their grandeur, but because of some sense of the abnormal, of the primeval which they produced.

As the winter progressed their *solitude à deux* became invaded. Visits from their acquaintances

among the residents were not to be avoided, but they were discouraged, and the outer world was carefully excluded, to the hum of much gossip.

Ivors was insane, diseased, profligate: he was living with a famous Russian dancer, a divorcée, had a *harâm* full of houris, whose slim, naked forms might be seen flitting through the oleanders. No theory was too wild, too lurid, to be believed, but gradually, as nothing startling occurred to fan the blaze, and as Hesper and Ivors appeared occasionally on the mainland, interest in El-Saâda died out, and the usual round of winter excitements took its place.

It was a favourite amusement with visitors to sail round the island, and day by day gaily-painted *felûkehs* belonging to the hotels hovered about it like butterflies, but their occupants saw little besides the palms and eucalyptus-trees, and a hedge of flaming hibiscus which guarded one end of the island; while the only living creatures who presented themselves to their gaze were Mahmud, the blue-clad urchin who lay along the rough shaft of the *sakîyeh*, and the fawn cow which turned its creaking, purring wheel while the long chain of dripping red pots dipped into the well beneath.

The gazelles followed Hesper everywhere, pattering through the big cool rooms and the pillared verandah on tiny polished hoofs: and the days drifted by. Ivors painted, and Hesper read, worked, and made music.

The service of the house was silent-footed and unobtrusive, and there was nothing external to mar the harmony.

Ivors was trying portraits—the Hesper he knew and

the Ingram she knew. Inspiration sped his brush, with the result that the love-illumined woman looked from one canvas, while the whole appeal of the man's soul spoke through the brown eyes in the other.

He was thinner than ever, and his cough troubled him. To Hesper's anxiety he made impatient answer that he always coughed a little in the winter, and that there was no need to fuss. His secret wore upon him daily and fretted his patience to a thread. His clear vision of Hesper's character made it imperative that he should tell her if he wished to snatch at his lost self-respect or to retain a shadow of hers, but the words choked him. He could not force them to his lips. His fastidiousness revolted from the blackness of his own deceit, but his whole soul shrank from the thought of meeting the look in her eyes when she knew.

Sometimes the calm serenity of her happiness almost irritated him. How could she be so happy when he was suffering the tortures of the damned? Then in an agony of reaction he would kiss her feet in spirit.

At other times he fancied coldness, a slight withdrawal on her part, and tormented himself with wondering if she suspected anything, if she were changing towards him, if he were losing her love? Then would follow fierce outbursts of affection, passionate demands, incessant claims which puzzled Hesper and made her feel a faint sense of apprehension.

Ivors' gusts of petulance, his fitfulness, his alternations of mood pricked her to wonder, but she attributed them chiefly to his variations of health. Often the passage which had offended her in Gerda's letter recurred to her mind.

"Mammy was fearfully afraid that I should fall in love with Mr. Ivors, but indeed there was never any fear of that. I like a man to be all a man, and not partly a woman, and there is a good deal of femininity about Mr. Ivors. I don't mean anything nasty. I mean the nice kind, which some women love in a man, but I don't."

This crude expression of a truth had hitherto jarred on Hesper; but in these days she was aware of its reality.

"There is more of the child than the woman in him," she told herself, "and it is the child who needs me most."

She was infinitely patient with him, and infinitely responsive. She called upon all her stores of loving and giving to supply his want, and she felt amply rewarded when one day he told her that he had written to Hildred. She lifted brows of delicate enquiry, and thought she read the answer she desired in his smile. The warm kiss she gave him told him so, and added another flame to his torment, which increased as he heard her go singing softly about the house for the rest of the day.

He let opportunity after opportunity slip by, and the days were prodigal of them. Hesper did not like to worry him with questions, of which he was always impatient, but at times she felt as if some barrier had arisen between them—a barrier of glass, as it were, which was tangible, yet through which she could see.

Once she asked him if he were tired of El-Saâda, if he would like to go anywhere else.

"Tired of this Paradise?" he answered. "No, beloved. Besides, wherever we went I should take myself with me. Some wise man said once that 'always in the sunshine is a black spot: the shadow of ourselves.' That is what ails me."

"Are you sure?" she was insistent for once. "You would tell me, wouldn't you, if anything were really amiss?"

She put her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes were very blue, very sweet, very pleading. "You wouldn't keep anything from your own wife, would you, Ingram?"

"My own wife! Good God!" he cried, taking her hands in his. How could he kill that look, that sublime faith and trust in him? How could he tell her that she, his soul's comrade, his ideal woman, was no wife at all? How could he let her know what he had dared to make her in the eyes of the world?

He swallowed a lump in his throat that seemed to choke him.

"You've made a sorry bargain, Hesper Belhasard," he said huskily.

"Don't be nonsensical!"

"They're the truest words I ever spoke. You went through the wood and picked up the crooked stick when you took me," he said, gazing hungrily at her.

"There's nothing crooked about you, dearest," she breathed happily.

How could he shatter this image, this phantasm of what he might have been? Oh, if he had but met her before Fate had bound him in fetters! He could have become the man of her dreams. She could have taken

him by the hand and led him with her to the Kingdom of Heaven. But now . . . now. . . . He groaned aloud.

"Ingram! What is it? Are you ill?"

"No, nothing. Only a twinge," he answered, turning his head away.

"Where? Is it your heart? Oh, darling, I wish you would see Dr. Ayrton."

"You should know best about my heart. You have it." He joked with set lips. "No, dear fuss, my heart is as sound as a bell."

"What is it, then? You don't know how you frighten me."

"Don't be a goose. Indigestion, old age, conscience—what you will." He took up the lute, and plucked at it with fingers that trembled. He seemed to himself to have shrunk to the meanest dimensions, a shivering creature whose shrivelled soul still had power to feel and to mock at its miserable owner.

After another period of feverish doubt which was followed by the usual reaction of passionate need, of frantic demands on Hesper's love, Opportunity, the juggler, offered him the golden ball again instead of the bubble, but once more he thrust it aside.

"I fancied that you had changed to me," he said. He was lying on the divan in the verandah, and Hesper knelt beside him.

Isis, Horus, Thout and Hathor looked down from the tenting in gay splashes of colour. Outside the verandah a pepper-tree raised feathery foliage against the blue, and in its branches the bulbuls chirped and twittered. From the distance came the sleepy purr

of the *sakîyeh*, and through the faint insistence of sounds rose the rush and swirl of the Nile. The air was warm and heavy with the perfume of the white-starred Egyptian jasmine, which clambered over the end of the verandah, flinging great scented trails across the low cream parapet.

"How could you fancy such folly?" she asked, noting with a pang how thin were the temples from which she stroked back his hair. "Never, never dream of such a thing again. How could I change to you, my very dearest, to you who have filled my life with happiness, unless to love you more, if that were possible? Why do you worry yourself with these nightmares? It's so bad for you, and I believe it makes your cough worse."

"Oh, don't fuss," he said irritably. Then in swift remorse: "Hesper, you're an angel and I'm very much the other thing. I'd try the patience of any saint but you. I put a daily strain on you——"

"You put it on yourself, too, Ingram, by these foolish doubts."

"I don't know how you bear with me. Some day you'll get tired of the job, and leave me to my own devices."

"Ingram, don't!" she cried, wounded.

"What? You wouldn't? Let me see your face. You wouldn't desert me whatever I did. You'd stick to me through thick and thin? You'd never leave me?"

Hesper answered with trembling lips.

"You hurt me more by these doubts than——" she stopped: she could not control her voice.

He caught her to him and kissed her passionately, her eyes, her hair, her lips ; but what seemed to her the ardour of his first love was fervour tinged with the bitterness of despair. In spite of her answer he could not cling to it as he would, for he knew that she had not the faintest knowledge of the real meaning that underlay his questions. Dare he put this great love to such a test ? He knew that the best of women often judge harshly, narrowly, that out of the whiteness of their own purity they have no pity for the soiled raiment of others less fortunate. Should he tell her now and end for ever this doubt which consumed him ?

Her soft voice was murmuring something in his ear.
. . . What divine folly was it uttering ?

“ If there is anything in me which jars upon you in any way, any little trick of speech, or manner, or gesture, I would *far* rather that you told me of it than that you remained silent for fear of hurting me, and continued to let it irritate you.”

“ *You* irritate me ? ” he cried, with a depth of humility in his tone. “ Lord, will men and women ever really understand each other ? ” Then, with a change of key : “ Don’t let your goose’s feathers grow into angel’s wings, Hesper Belhasard, unless they would be large enough to cover me too ! ”

CHAPTER VII

A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

AFTER this outburst followed a period of calm. Ivors was in the position of a man who is condemned to death, but who has to fix the day for his own execution. Daily it was borne in upon him that if he were ever to know peace again he must tell Hesper what he had done, that even the worst would be easier to bear than this constant gnawing terror ; and the decision brought with it a certain sense of relief. That she should hear the truth from other lips than his would doubly deepen his guilt ; the cold, bleak, naked truth as others would tell it, shivering without even a rag of his love to cover it. No, he must tell her himself in the dust on his knees at her feet. Perhaps she would forgive him, or at least not condemn him too harshly because he had loved her so much.

Lightened of so much of his burden he became almost his old insouciant self again. He painted wonderful splashes of colour, rainbow-tinted mist and opaline hazes. Too impatient to tame the birds, as Hesper did, he teased and played with the gazelles, tying silver bells round their necks, and driving them, a fairy team, through the garden. He made love to Hesper, wooing her with roses, pomegranates and sprays of jasmine, crowning her with the large starry blossoms and

calling her his "branch of Evin's apple-tree, with twigs of white silver and buds of crystal with blossoms."

"If I had a harp of applewood I could enchant you," she said, falling in with his mood. "There is great magic in a harp made of applewood."

"You don't need any harp. It is I who fain would woo you with my lute."

He sang many love-songs to her in those days, Arabic, Persian, Spanish, but always to the lute, for he said that his voice was too husky for the piano.

The reaction from those weeks of torment was delicious. Feeling almost happy he felt almost good: the impulse of confession seemed to bring its own absolution. "*Every knot has an unraveller in Allah.*"

Still, bitter qualms shook him as to what she would say, how she would look, when he told her. The thought of her eyes shrinking from his hurt him like a blow. It seemed like a murder to kill her faith in him, but he would abase himself before her, he would kneel so low in humiliation that for very pity she could not leave him in the dust.

He put off the evil day from week to week, but like the condemned man he knew that he could not put it off for ever. A period was set to his indecision. The day should be appointed: let Fate decide the hour.

He would have one more perfect day, and then——

"Hesper Belhasard, what is your favourite day in the week?" he asked her suddenly.

"Thursday," she replied, looking up with a smile, "because that is the day I first met you."

"Then on Thursday I am going to take you for an excursion, probably the last for the season, as the

weather is growing warm again." He savoured the irony of his simple statement. Perhaps after that day Hesper would be his comrade no more. Perhaps she would cast him adrift to be blown again like a leaf on the winds of chance. Well . . . if she did . . . there were ways of ending it all. He could not face the desert of life if what meant the greatest and best of it were torn from him any more than he could continue to breathe if his living heart were cut from his living body. It would be the same in a spiritual sense, with the bitterness of bodily separation added.

"Where are we going to, Ingram?"

"Wait and see, Madama."

"Are we to go by boat, camel, donkey or sand-cart?"

"Why this anxiety?"

"So that I shall know what to wear."

"Wear your *Madama Nubia*."

"The sun is too hot!"

"Put on one of your white frocks, then, and my chain of turquoises to make your eyes look blue. When you wear those your eyes always reflect the love-colour."

"Don't they do that in any case?" she asked, coaxingly.

In spite of his jesting fear tinged every thought, every movement, the unadmitted fear of losing her. He determined to taste the sweetness of this last day to the full, but fear dropped doubt into the cup.

Thursday dawned, and Ivors' waking thought drove sleep away.

"To-morrow I must tell her. To-morrow, to-morrow, to-morrow."

The words rang in his ears like a knell. Through the early morning he watched her, hanging on her words, forestalling her desires, realising with each fleeting moment more and more of what she was to him.

Hesper's anxieties were lulled to rest. She was frankly happy at the thought of the long golden day they were to spend together. She did not care where they went, what they did, so long as Ingram was with her, his old whimsical self. His new watchful wistfulness escaped her, or rather melted into his general charm.

They started early, as the first part of their journey was by train. When they alighted at a little wayside station Moussa awaited them with donkeys and a flat reed basket.

Hesper's steed was large and grey : his tail and mane were dyed orange with henna, and round his neck he bore chains of gilt coins and blue and white beads which jingled pleasantly as he went.

Ivors' black donkey was gay with scarlet and yellow saddlecloth and red-humped native saddle, and both animals had neat geometrical patterns clipped on their hindlegs. Moussa's beast fell behind while its rider conversed amiably with the blue-girt donkey-boys, who sometimes sprang forward with a great show of energy to urge their steeds onward with clucks and grunts and harsh cries.

The air was balmy and delicious : a faint pearly haze softened the intense blueness of the sky, and shimmered dreamily on the Nile, by whose bank the path led for a time. Passing through the hard-beaten mud streets of a village (a-jostle with flap-eared goats, long-

legged hens, peeping children, and freely-moving women), whose pungent atmosphere surrounded them almost tangibly, it was a relief to come upon the half-empty track by the broad spaces of the river ; to see the darting black and white kingfishers, or the metallic flash of a blue one up a side canal ; to hear the whisper of the tall purple-stemmed sugar-cane, or savour the scent of mimosa blown upon a warm morning wind.

On sandy islets storks and herons brooded, or brown and white mottled vultures picked at a heap of tumbled bones where the river had taken toll of sheep or goat.

Fishermen waded along the foreshore, their nets, silken-fine, coiled in loops about their wrists. A deft touch of sinewy fingers, a rhythmic movement of bronze arms, and out upon the air they flew like wisps of pale brown mist, settling for an instant in wide rings upon the surface before they sank out of sight beneath the water.

Then the track turned through another palm-girdled village, and on to the edge of cultivation, where the tawny desert stretched in wrinkled folds to the foot of the Arabian hills.

The hollows in the sand were grey and lavender, and an occasional rock or elevation cast a shadow that had a hyacinth bloom.

The great silence brought a sense of peace to Ivors' turbulent heart. He turned to Hesper as they rode across the noiseless sand.

"'Unborn To-morrow and dead Yesterday.
Why fret about them if To-day be sweet,'"

he said, flinging a challenge to Fate.

"To-day *is* sweet," answered Hesper, as she had done once so long ago.

"Too sweet to last."

"Then there's to-morrow."

"To-morrow! We won't think about to-morrow."

"Let's enjoy to-day."

"Are you enjoying it, Hesper Belhasard?"

"Oh, so much. Inexpressibly, my dearest. I must invent a new vocabulary."

Why did the trivial words dart javelin stings from the past? The shadow of himself, no longer merely a black spot, threatened to blot out the sunshine of to-day. He strove with it. To-day was his, his last day. What to-morrow might mean for Hesper he did not try to surmise. There were abysses into which he dared not peer. To him its issues were grave beyond conjecture. After to-day those eyes of hers, which for him held all the sweetness of the world, and all love's sorrow as well as love's laughter, might look at him with hatred as his wife's had done on that long-banished day, which being dead yet lived, and being past was ever present.

No, he could not picture hatred in Hesper's eyes. Reproach perhaps, the wounded gaze of one mortally hurt by the best-beloved—bah! Why should these thoughts buzz round him like a cloud of flies and spoil his last good moments? Once more he strove to banish them.

Far behind them stretched the Nile-valley, a blur of green in every imaginable shade from vivid emerald to olive-grey, threaded through by the silver ribbon of the river; before them rose amber slopes of sand to the

hills that loomed sheer above them in fawn and yellow crags with deep rusty crevices. A cleft in the heights opened before them showing a narrow desolate valley of rocks and sand, with a track which bent towards the right. Near the top of a bluff which was shaped like a crouching lion the tawny hillside seemed to be pierced with dark blue hollows.

Ivors pointed with his stick.

"It is there we are going, beloved. It is a deserted Christian hermitage."

"Up there? Then we shall have to fly," answered Hesper, smiling happily.

"No need to use your wings yet. There is a path, but it zigzags steeply up the hill."

"I am entirely in your hands. Whither thou goest I will go."

His heart leaped absurdly. "Hesper!"

"Why should it be such a constant surprise to you to find that I love you?" she asked rather wistfully.

"Because I deserve it so little," he replied, with bent head.

The slope grew steeper, and the sun beat more fiercely. The winding of the valley cut them off from cultivation and civilisation. Burnt-looking stones lay scattered on the sand, and a high spur of rock cast a sharp black shadow across the path at a bend.

Suddenly from behind it stepped an odd figure, hunchbacked, bearded, gnome-like, whose brown, seamed face and white rolled turban made it appear as if the spirit of one of the burnt distorted stones had unexpectedly taken shape and stood before them. A

bunch of heavy keys dangled from his girdle and an old-fashioned, long-barrelled musket over his shoulder added a suggestion of lawlessness that was as much one with the barren valley and the desert hills as the kite which wheeled, solitary, in the blue overhead.

"I am the Keeper of the Caves," he announced in guttural Arabic. "Does his excellency wish to see them?"

Ivors answered him in the same tongue and the man responded courteously, looking the while with bold admiration at Hesper. Then he turned and bade them follow him. Despite his deformity he seemed to be possessed of great strength and agility as he swung before them with free gait up the narrow pathway to the plateau in front of the hermitage.

It was a strange primitive place, this deserted sanctuary, where tempest-torn men had fled from the temptations and distractions of the outer world to seek peace and to find their own souls.

The hot sun seemed to invoke the spirit of oblivion which brooded over the place. There was no sign of life beyond their own incongruous presence: no least green thing peeped from the burning rock, no lizard darted across the glistening sand, no bird hopped or twittered. Even the kite had vanished from the empty sky. Forgotten by time, deserted by humanity, a heavy silence encircled the place. Their very foot-falls were lost in the thick sand.

From a long vaulted corridor hollowed out of the living hillside opened a series of small rock-hewn cells whose tawny walls bore the Coptic symbol of the Cross. One or two of them had wooden doors which the Keeper

of the Caves flung wide, disclosing crude frescoes of saints and martyrs, flame-racked or arrow-stung.

In the centre of the corridor was a door that was higher and more ornate than the others. It was roughly-carved and was clamped and ornamented with pierced bands of copper, green with age.

"Now I will show you the mosque of the Christians, *o efendi*," he said, inserting a wrought-copper key into the ancient lock.

Then, to the sound of a creak that was like the heavy sigh of eld, he opened to them a dim vaulted rock-chapel, its walls and ceilings covered with faded paintings. In the half-light the effect was surprisingly beautiful. Ivors thought of the sumptuously dight chapels of kings, of the brilliant Sainte Chapelle, of the lovely Spanish Chapel at Florence, and felt the same sense of rich yet subdued beauty and colour in the very atmosphere of this little vaulted hollow.

Over the old altar shone Christ surrounded by adoring angels. The figures were stiff, the attitudes primitive and awkward, yet through it all breathed an essence of adoration which made one lose sense of its mere artistic value. The spirit of art was there mingled with the spirit of prayer, shining like a jewel in the wilderness.

Ivors' beauty-loving nature was captivated. He felt grateful to the "eremites and friars" who had in their primitive way sown the seed of art in the desert, making it to blossom like a rose. He wondered what manner of men they had been, from what they had fled—taking themselves with them—to what they had attained?

Hesper sighed, touched by the surprise and enchantment of it all. Moved by an impulse she left Ivors' side and knelt before the ancient altar with its adoring angels.

Ivors' heart contracted as he looked. That her religion meant much to her he knew, but it was beautiful, remote and as deeply hidden as this old chapel. She did not speak about it, but its inexpressible fragrance breathed through her spirit and distilled itself in sweet womanliness and gentle charity.

He had often watched her at her prayers, and now, as always, felt a sense of her withdrawal, of the presence of an essence which he could not capture. Sometimes it was as a benediction to him to know that she was so innately good : at others the sense of contrast opened a sudden gulf between them. Would he lose her or gain her through eternity for her goodness ? To-morrow he would know.

A carving round the base of the wall caught his eye and he stooped to examine it. Some words in Arabic were engraved on the stone.

"What is written here ?" he asked the Keeper.

The bright eyes peered upwards, then down at the stone again.

"I used to know, *efendi*, but I have forgotten. If Allah wills my fingers will tell me."

He closed his eyes and felt each deeply-cut letter with his strong brown fingers, mumbling to himself in Arabic. To Ivors' highly-strung fancy he seemed to be weaving an evil spell in that sacred place, while Hesper, white and remote, rapt in prayer, was detached from him in spirit as well as in body.

The mumbling stopped : the bent figure straightened itself as well as it could, and the man looked up at Ivors.

" These are the words, *o efêndi*—some Christian spell without a doubt. ' To-day if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.' "

" *To-day if ye will hear His voice*——" the words fell on Ivors' ears with a shock. They chimed so aptly with his thought, with his design. He took the man by the shoulder.

" You are sure those are the words ? Quite sure ? "

" *Yâ salâm, efêndi !* It is long since I read, but as Allah is my witness those be the words my fingers told me. They are not evil words, *efêndi* ? "

" No, no," said Ivors. "*To-day if ye will hear His voice, harden not your hearts.*"

Well, he had heard the voice to-day, the voice crying in the wilderness, and he was not going to harden his heart, he was going to confess his sin to Hesper to-morrow.

At the thought wild ideas rushed through his brain. It seemed as if Hesper were rapt away from him already : as if for countless ages she had knelt there before that remote unserved altar ; as if he must rouse her, snatch her up, carry her away from these influences into the secret heart of the hills.

As if his thoughts had touched her, she rose and came towards him. In the twilight of the rock-chapel his face looked white and strange.

" Come out," he said, almost roughly, " I must breathe the outer air again."

She slipped her arm through his and rubbed her

cheek against his shoulder. Her heart was full of him : her prayers had all been his.

The light seemed dazzling after the dimness of the church, and the cliffs were irradiated with a golden glow.

"Out of the darkness into light," said Hesper, lifting her face to the sunshine.

"Don't go into the light without me," he cried hoarsely, detaining her.

"I don't want to go anywhere without you."

"Not even to Heaven ? "

"Not even to Heaven," she answered with a little sigh that melted into a smile.

Up past the forgotten hermitage they went, wandering along the rocky plateau to find that Moussa had set a feast for them at the mouth of a blue-shadowed cave.

On the fine yellow sand he had spread a rose and purple shawl for Hesper to sit upon, and had laid a table of Nature's providing with young pigeons, crisp bread, golden loose-skinned oranges, and ripest pomegranates. He had made a pattern in the sand with jasmine stars and curling orange-leaves, and into silver cups he had poured libations of white wine.

"This is like our first feast, dearest," said Hesper. "Ah, do you remember ? How lonely I felt before you came, and how dull my ears were that I never heard the sound of your feet ! "

"It would have been better for you if they had carried me out of your life."

"High treason and heresy ! " she smiled. " You must be extra nice to me now to make up for the

disloyalty of that speech. I pledge you, my dearest. I drink to you and to our love."

She lifted one of the silver cups, touched it with her lips, and handed it to him. He took it with fingers that shook.

"You have filled my cup with sweetness," she went on. "Ah, how lonely I was without you!"

He handed back the cup. "To-morrow I may fill it with bitterness," he said. The hand that touched hers in the transfer was burning.

"Ah, no," she answered. "You couldn't, so long as you love me."

His face lightened. "Be sure of that, whatever happens. No man ever loved woman as I love you."

"I haven't crystallised into a common-place, then?" she looked at him from under her black lashes.

"No, you haven't. You were more correct in your diagnosis of human nature than I. One cannot foretell what even one's nearest and dearest will do in the stress of circumstance."

"Who is your nearest and dearest?" she coaxed, trying to woo him back to his earlier mood of gaiety.

"Conceited creature! As if you didn't know!"

"Of course I know, but I lo-ove to hear you say so!"

The strangeness of the bread and wine among the desert hills, the remoteness from their kind, the silence and solitude of their surroundings, curtaining them as in a sanctuary, made the little meal seem almost sacramental to Ivors.

"To-day if ye will hear His voice——"

He had vacillated before. He would postpone no

longer. To-morrow he would confess his sin and take his punishment like a man.

To-day——?

When the feast was over and its traces silently removed by Moussa, Ivors lay on the sand with his head on Hesper's lap. He felt a sense of peace steal over him, and the sweetness of her presence soothed him with its wonted magic. At times he seized and kissed the gentle fingers which stroked his hair and forehead.

"How good you are! How far above me you shine, you fixèd star!" he cried once.

The stroking ceased. Hesper was troubled.

"My dearest, I wish you would not idealise me so. I am not good—I am not a star, but a very ordinary, faulty human being."

"I don't idealise you. I call you conceited and a goose. Is that the language of rapture?"

She gave a little crooning laugh.

"I know you're a woman, which spells weak humanity for both sexes, but Lord! I often wonder whether the worst woman isn't better than the best of men?"

Hesper flushed and sparkled. "Ingram! The worst of women better than you? I never heard such absurd nonsense!"

"Ah, who's idealising now? You don't know men and their capacities, Hesper Belhasard. You don't know their temptations and passions, nor how close the beast in them is always lurking. What did these hermits flee from?"

"I know that they were made in the image of God," answered Hesper very low.

"And how cruelly, how brutally men often deface that image!" cried Ivors. "You believe in God, Hesper, in a personal, actual God?"

Hesper was startled. She spoke softly, shyly, out of the depths of her reticence.

"I believe in an ineffable Presence, an ineffable Goodness and Understanding. Yes, Some One Who knows our sins and weaknesses, and makes allowances for the unseen temptations of circumstance and surroundings——"

"Some One Who really cares?" he interrupted.

"Some One Who really cares," she answered low. "I am stupid at saying what I feel. I only know. After all, we have only finite, limited words to express the ineffable, and only earthly symbols to express heavenly things."

"But you believe that somewhere there is Some One Who cares what becomes of us, as I care for you or you care for me?" he persisted.

"Oh, more, far more. That's an earthly symbol which expresses the heavenly. If we two faulty human beings can care so much——" she broke off, but her silence spoke.

Ivors looked through the mouth of the cave across the peach-yellow valley to the hot hills opposite, which seemed to burn against the intense blueness of the sky.

"Have you ever come across this verse, Hesper?" he asked after a pause.

' Within my earthly temple there's a crowd :
There's one of us that's humble, one that's proud,
There's one that's broken-hearted for his sins,
And one who, unrepentant, sits and grins :

There's one who loves his neighbour as himself
 And one who cares for naught but fame and pelf.—
 From much corroding care I should be free
 If once I could determine which is me.'

"With a few little differences there's Ingram Ivors—Ego—for you."

"There's each of us," answered Hesper. "I'm sure most human beings have felt that sense of warring entities."

"Only those with imaginations. The fellow who wrote that packed a profound truth into his nutshell of verse." He gazed silently into the distance.

"Wise men crack nuts for fools to eat," said Hesper. "Do you know that your hair would curl beautifully if you would only let it grow a little longer."

"Don't tell me that you want a curly horror for a husband?" he began lightly, but the word husband checked him.

He rose. "It's time for us to go," he said.

Hesper held out her hands, and as he bent to take them the picture became impressed on his mind—the silent sanctuary and the dark recession of the cave, the white-clad woman with the chain of turquoises which called the love-colour to her eyes, the glowing rug on the fine sand, and the slim hands stretched up in appeal.

"Is our lovely day over?" she asked regretfully. She slipped her hand within his arm and rested against him when he had helped her to rise.

"Not yet, the Lord be praised," he answered. "We have the ride home and the night with its myriad stars."

CHAPTER VIII

TO-MORROW

WHEN they had left behind them the lonely valley, wishing a "Night as white as milk" to the Keeper of the Caves, an odd spirit of reaction seized Ivors.

He laughed, jested, urged his donkey to a gallop, and challenged Hesper to a race across the desert. She laughed too, and fell in with his mood, and with quickened pulses they raced across the heavy sand to the sound of beating hoofs and the pattering feet of the donkey-boys. They had perforce to slacken speed when they came to the highway along the Nile-bank and mingled once more with humanity, the crowd which came and went to the watering-places in the red sunset: the dark-robed women with jars, the water-carriers with their shaggy goat-skins, the children driving cows and buffaloes, the shepherds leading their flocks and herds, the strings of camels tied nose to tail, grunting and bubbling as they passed, the little pink-clad girls with baskets of fuel-cakes on their heads, the brown-robed men with their wool and spindles.

So through the crowded village with its gleam of fires seen through square and courtyard, its palm-thatched houses and its sharp-nosed, barking pariah

dogs, to the zinc and wood railway-station set incongruously beyond it.

Their train was not yet due, and the wind which sometimes springs up on the Nile at sunset blew with an unwonted sharpness. Ivors, who was heated from his ride, shivered a little at its touch.

Hesper, quick to note, was all solicitude.

"Ingram, haven't you got a coat? Moussa, why did you not bring your master's coat?"

"Also an eider-down and a hot-water bottle?" scoffed Ivors. "Dear fuss, why don't you offer me your turquoise chain for a wrap?"

Hesper smiled. "Let's walk about at any rate, so that you shan't get a chill."

"Bachelor's wives and old maid's children—no, that's not appropriate," he began.

"Appropriate enough," she answered. "*I* was an old maid for so long, with no one to take care of, that it's more applicable than you think. I suppose the reason that the saying is never inverted to old maid's husbands and bachelor's children is that every woman is at heart a mother. We all have the protective instinct. I suppose that is why we look upon our men-folk as nothing more—or less—than big children."

As she spoke a sense of that divine instinct compact of the desire to give, to understand, to strengthen, to protect, and above all to love, flowed from her to him, and seemed to be but another link in the chain that bound them together. Needing her as he did it would break her heart to break that chain, he reasoned.

"That, in a way, is how I looked on my dear father," the soft voice went on, impelled to confidence by the

subtle influences of his nearness and the waning light. "It was that alone which kept me from being too cruelly hurt when he failed me, as people have failed me all my life. Now I've learned to be content to give and not to expect too much in return, to do my utmost not to fail anyone who depends on me, and not to over-demand. In one way or another everyone on whom I ever depended failed me, everyone but you!" she ended with unwonted fire.

Ivors turned abruptly on the platform, so that his back was to the flaming after-glow and his face in shadow. Her words, as well as her sudden clinging touch, smote deep. He pressed her arm in silence. He could find no words for the thoughts which surged within him.

When at last he spoke his words were apparently irrelevant to Hesper's confidence, but she was used to his mental flights and followed them, or anticipated them as best she might.

"What clogged minds the old animals must have had who pictured Hell as a fiery furnace!" he cried. "The doctrine of the immortality of the soul is a more exquisitely cruel one than that of the fiercest of material flames. Omar, the old pagan, knew better."

He quickened his pace as he murmured :

"I sent my Soul through the Invisible
Some letter of the After-Life to spell :
And by-and-by my Soul returned to me,
And answered, "I myself am Heaven and Hell."

"That's the crux—*I myself am Heaven and Hell.*
To take yourself with you throughout eternity . . .
Lord, what a refinement of torture!"

Hesper was puzzled at his vehemence. She could not understand the bitterness of self-condemnation which tintured his speech.

"But it isn't your worst self you ⁷take with you," she began tentatively.

"Of course not," he returned impatiently. "It's only your better self which is fine enough to appreciate the subtler shades of punishment. Here's the train, puffing derision at the idea of my discussing soul-psychology." He laughed.

"Why do you laugh, Ingram?"

"Because crying is such a hideous sound," he answered unexpectedly.

When the train moved out of the station he came close to her.

"Let me lay my head on your nice soft shoulder," he said. "That at any rate has never failed me."

"And never will," she asserted, touching his cheek tenderly.

"What a cocksure person you are!" he returned, with his old whimsical smile. Then after a long silence: "It is from this bourne that I should like to set out for the last Great Adventure," he said softly, and he did not move until the quickened beat of her heart was followed by a patter of warm tears upon his cheek.

Hesper thought of his words in the dawn of the morrow when, after a night of alternate shivering and fever, Ivors woke from a fitful doze to a rending attack of coughing which, to her horror and despair, ended in a violent hemorrhage of the lungs.

Illness, with its innumerable needs and details, was almost unknown to her, and she waited for the arrival of Dr. Ayrton in a mute agony that shut out hope from her horizon. The still speechless figure with its haunting eyes was not her Ingram: the unresponsive hand which lay in hers was not the hand whose touch she would have known among ten thousand.

The hours of watching seemed endless. A century separated her from the ordinary life of yesterday. It seemed as if the blow had fallen years ago, as if this deadly certainty of peril had always enwrapped her.

It was a white, despairing woman who faced Dr. Ayrton when he came, who spoke briefly, and huskily, but whose beseeching soul looked at him out of her darkly-shadowed eyes.

He was a kindly man of middle-age, who had looked on life and death all his days as the great unsolvable mysteries. He had attended Ivors before, and was all too familiar with the state of his lungs. He made a brief examination, a briefer diagnosis.

Ivors' brown eyes questioned him, dog-like.

"Am I——?"

"No speaking, please," said Dr. Ayrton. "You're a nice fellow to give your poor wife a fright like this. Donkey-riding yesterday across the desert, heat, a chill. I wonder at you at your age, Ivors! Now listen, my good man, I deliver absolute authority into Mrs. Ivors' hands. You're not to budge—prop him steady with pillows, Mrs. Ivors. You are not to speak. No worry, no agitation. If you want to get better your only chance is to lie as still as a mummy and do what you're told."

The simile was not a happy one, there was too death-like a stillness already about the tense form in the bed. Only the eyes seemed to be alive, and they were mutely asking, asking, asking.

Hesper saw the appeal, and bent towards him.

"You want something, dearest. He wants something. May he whisper, doctor?"

"One word, then. He must not be agitated."

His lips formed the word, "Hildred."

"Yes, dear, I know. Hildred. He wants his daughter to know, doctor. You want me to telegraph? Very well. I'll send Moussa at once. Her address is in your pocket-book. No, I won't leave you, except to write the wire. The littlest moment, dearest."

She followed Dr. Ayrton into the big, cool hall with its rich Persian rugs.

"Well?" she asked, as countless women have asked before her of countless human arbiters.

Dr. Ayrton was vague, guarded.

"He should have come to me sooner. The great thing now is to guard against a recurrence of the hemorrhage. If you have to hold him he must be kept absolutely still. You have an ice-machine? Good. Would you like me to wire to Cairo for a nurse? We mustn't have you knocking yourself up, Mrs. Ivors."

"It doesn't matter about me——" she began.

"Now that's the great mistake that all you good, unselfish women make," he interrupted. "You must take care of yourself: you must husband your strength. It's selfishness not to do so; and recoils on those whom you desire to serve."

"I don't want a nurse unless it is absolutely neces-

sary. Miss Ivors will probably come as soon as she can, and I expect my own maid, who is a splendid nurse, in about a week. If you think that Moussa and I can manage until then? I'll take great care of myself." She tried to smile at Dr. Ayrton, who coughed as he turned away.

"Very well. If you write out that wire I'll send it for you." He gave some further directions and said he would come again later, thinking, as he strode through the oleanders which bent their rosy buds above the tinkling stream, that it was extremely problematical whether Ivors would live to see daughter or nurse or even the dawn of another day.

"If he has another hemorrhage he'll go out like the snuff of a candle," he said to himself, and he went back to his rooms to dispose of his few fashionable patients for the day and make preparations to take up his abode for the time being at El-Saâda.

So the stars fought in their courses, and to-morrow was farther off for Ivors than ever. He had had his chance and lost it, but in his weakness nothing mattered. He was not capable of coherent thought: he drifted on a sea of nothingness where the only real thing was sight and touch of Hesper. He forgot even the vague impulse which had spurred him to ask for Hildred: he did not care for anything so long as Hesper were present. He had thought that she was going away, but she had not gone. She was always there when he opened his eyes on this new vague world: that was all that mattered. Once when by chance she was absent his haunting, terrified eyes sent Moussa in swift pursuit.

The days dragged in an endless dreamlike routine. Everything was changed by the coming of the grim presence. The infinitesimal loomed into the magnitude of the abnormal: the silent house seemed full of shadows and footsteps: the ticking of a clock seemed a waiting menace.

The suddenness of the change at first stunned Hesper, but when the hours passed into days and the days into nights, and days and nights were woven into the chain of a week without the dreaded recurrence, her spirit lifted itself again, and on the far horizon she seemed to catch a faint vision of hope.

Dr. Ayrton ceased to spend his nights on the island; the tension, but not the vigilance, was slightly relaxed. The gazelles came pattering into Ivors' room in search of Hesper, and were relentlessly hunted forth by Moussa lest they should disturb his beloved *efèndi*.

Memory had not as yet pierced Ivors' apathy. The anodyne of illness had dulled all requirements to his need of Hesper, and the faculty of dreamlike existence from day to day. He had forgotten the stress of the past, or at most had but a dim subconsciousness of it, a sensation rather than a coming menace.

At first Hesper could scarcely believe the tale of the creeping hours, then as he grew gradually better she told herself that his words on that Thursday had not been prophetic, premonitory of cruel separation. She was content with so little, just this first slight relaxation of the cold clutch of terror which gripped her heart. If from day to day she kept him with her she would not look ahead. With tears and prayers she wrestled

on her knees for Ivors' life, and saw with thankful heart the hourly answer.

Sometimes they talked a little in whispers : sometimes she read him to sleep.

" I think old Ayrton thought I was done for," he said once. " I was in the valley of the shadow, I know, but you pulled me back."

" I ? "

" Yes, you, Hesper Belhasard. I was conscious of you somehow. You wouldn't let me go."

" No, I held you close, beloved," she whispered triumphantly. " Oh, my very dearest ! "

He knit puzzled brows. " There was something I can't remember. I thought you were going to cast me adrift."

" That must have been the fever, dearest. *I* cast you adrift ? Such nonsense ! " She gave a low happy laugh. A few days ago she had thought that she would never laugh again.

" There *was* something," he persisted, " but I can't remember."

" Don't try. Shall I read you the ' Lotus-Eaters ' ? This is just the warm dreamy atmosphere for it, with the jasmine-scent coming in through the windows." She took the book from the table and began to read in her cooing voice, which harmonised with the words she uttered :—

" There is sweet music here that softer falls
Than petals from blown roses on the grass,
Or night-dew on still water between walls
Of shadowy granite in a gleaming pass ;
Music that gentlier on the spirit lies
Than tir'd eyelids upon tir'd eyes ;
Music that brings sweet sleep down from the
blissful skies."

Before the soft voice had finished the Choric Song Ivors' tired eyelids closed upon his tired eyes, and he slept.

Hesper's heart contracted as she looked at him. Was this thin, white, weary being the Ingram who had laughed and joked and run races with her one short week ago? Was it not only the shadow of the man she loved? Ah, but her heart went out in doubled fulness to that shadow which had so nearly eluded her, so nearly slipped away into the Place of Shadows.

She would not let him go, he had murmured. Was that what it really meant? she wondered. Had her prayers kept him with her, her great insistent need of him? How they depended on each other, these two lonely creatures! Great tears welled up into her eyes and rolled slowly down her cheeks as she looked at the gaunt form, so nearly reft from her already, and thought of the frail hold which those hands, grown so suddenly white and thin, had upon life. Any remembrance of his petulance, his impatience, was swept away by the great flood of love which surged anew in her heart for him. She set self aside utterly. Even when Nanno, her one link with the past, arrived with great composure one evening, she did not let herself break down beyond a sob or two, and a cry of "Oh, Nanno! Nanno!"

"'Tis the fine uprise entirely for ye, me darlin' lamb—Miss Hesper, ma'am, I should say," said the elder woman, patting her nursling's shoulder. "To be livin' in a grand house like this, and married to that handsome gentleman, God bless him! 'Tis we'll nurse him, the two of us, until he gets as fat as butter."

Hesper dried her eyes and smiled. "That'll take

some time, I'm afraid, Nanno. Oh, how heavenly it is to have a woman to talk to again!" She suddenly realised what the gap had been now that it was filled. "We mustn't disturb Mr. Ivors at present. We have to be very, very careful of him. I won't even tell him that you are here for a day or two lest it should upset him. The least thing may bring on that dreadful hemorrhage again." She gave an involuntary shudder at the thought, then set her lips and braced herself to meet the future, strengthened already by Nanno's presence. "Miss Ivors may be here in a day or two. You remember her, Nanno? He asked for her the first day, but he hasn't mentioned her since. I haven't either, for fear of worrying him. She will probably wire if she is coming, or rather when she is coming, for I'm sure she'll come."

If she felt the faintest pang at having to share her beloved task with Hildred she did not admit it even to herself. She acknowledged the girl's right to be with her father. She could afford to let Hildred have the crumbs; nay, more, she would share what she could with her generously out of her abundance. Her heart felt very tender towards the girl during these days of anxiety, when she had time to think of other than Ivors. Had she known where to telegraph reassurance she would have done so, but no word came from Hildred.

CHAPTER IX

MANY WATERS

WHEN Ivors realised Nanno's presence he accepted the fact with the dreamy acquiescence into which all his former characteristics seemed to have merged. He did not suffer, except from extreme weakness ; he had no pain, mental or physical, save the sense of uneasiness whenever Hesper left his sight. It seemed to her that if she were at the remotest end of the garden she would still hear the husky whisper of "Hesper Belhasard," which checked her infrequent absences.

He grew daily a little better up to a certain point, but there progress ceased. Dr. Ayrton thought that the rapidly increasing heat of the weather retarded him, spoke of cooler air, but gave no hint of being able to move him as yet.

The roses were gone : the hot wind blew clouds of their petals across the verandah, and withered the waxen stars of the jasmine. The creaking of the *sakiyeh* sounded louder in the warm stillness, and the river ran daily lower. Hesper went into the garden late one afternoon to breathe the outer air. She had just read Ivors to sleep, and she crept softly away for a moment, leaving Nanno, a straight-backed vigilant watcher, incongruously knitting beneath one of the Moorish arches in the big darkened room.

The gazelles pattered to meet her, and licked the fingers that had forgotten to bring them sugar. With a hand on the neck of each she moved slowly down the path between the oleanders. One of them—Anas—left her, to sip daintily at the turquoise brink of the stream, and she stood waiting, gently caressing the dappled neck of the dainty Zahr.

It was a picture in keeping with the waning luxuriance of the garden ; blown roses, fading fires of oleander and poinsettia, and the tall white weary woman with the purple shadows of watching and sorrow under her eyes.

The song of Mahmud, the *sakīyeh* boy, came to her through the warm heavy air, increasing and diminishing in sound as the fawn cow went her slow round.

“ A lover said to a dove,
‘ Lend me your wings for a day ! ’ ”

What were the exact words ? How well she remembered the first day she had heard them, the day that the *felûkeh* brought her here to El-Sadâa, the Island of Happiness !

What had the magic of Egypt wrought for her ? Depths of loneliness and humiliation, heights of supreme joy. The Song of the Nile had touched for her the gamut of human emotions, and in her overstrung tired mood she was almost ready to hear a requiem in it now. A cloud of depression brooded heavily over her, the inevitable reaction from the constant strain, but she tried to dispel it, thankful for the reprieve granted from day to day.

“ I shall obtain enough love
O dove, for a year and a day.
Lend me your wings, O dove ! ”

The voice ceased with a little twirl, and then began

over again in a slightly higher key, to the accompaniment of the creaking wheel.

There was the sound of a dip of oars, a murmur of voices, but Hesper did not heed them until she saw a figure moving quickly up the path from the little landing-place—a slim, grey, girlish figure whose footsteps quickened as she approached.

“It’s Hildred!” she cried, hastening to meet her with open arms.

To Hildred, after the anxious monotony of her sea-voyage and the dust, heat, and fatigue of her long train-journey, the crossing from the mainland among the desolate islets and the vivid colouring of the wild Nubian hills seemed to cast about her a strange spell, which culminated when she set foot upon this enchanted island. The tall white figure against the green background, the gazelles, the turquoise bed of the rivulet, owned all the glamour of the unreal, and suggested some ancient mystic poem rather than the actualities of real life.

“Why, it’s Smarlie!” she cried, as she drew near. “How is he?”

“Better, thank God!” exclaimed Hesper, holding out her arms.

By some subconscious trick of memory the picture of Persephone’s return to the upper air flashed across Hildred’s mind. Hesper’s attitude was the attitude of Demeter, loving, expectant, and it gave the tired girl a sense of comfort, of ineffable relief, to feel those kind arms folded round her, and to receive that warm welcome where she had not known what to expect. After a moment she disengaged herself.

"You must be worn out, you poor child!" said Hesper. "Why did you not wire to let us know when to expect you? How did you get here?"

"I hired a boat at Assuan," answered Hildred, conscious now of intense fatigue. "I wrote. Didn't father get my letter?"

"No. There was no letter. Your room is ready, though."

Suddenly the oddness of the situation, the unexpectedness of Hesper's presence, her welcoming, proprietorial air, struck the girl in all its strangeness.

"Are you staying here, Smarlie?" she asked.

Hesper smiled. The child was tired, bewildered, upset from the long strain and anxiety. "Naturally. If you had only wired the name of your boat and date of starting you should have had a telegram at every port. I have been feeling so sorry for you, Hildred, but I did not know what to do, whether to write or not. Besides, I have been so terribly anxious. Ah, you don't know what it has been like!"

She gave a little shiver.

Hildred looked at her curiously, all fatigue forgotten. In the light of her father's former admission here was something which she could not understand.

"But—have you been nursing him?" she asked, puzzled. "Are the Austrians here?"

A sudden suspicion struck Hesper. Was it possible that Ingram had never told the girl at all? That she had misread the smile with which he had answered her wordless query? She felt a little chilled and sorry, for Hildred's warmth had not been in response to their

new relations, as she had fancied, and the revelation was yet to come.

"Graf von Strelitz lent the island to your father for the winter. We have been here since November. I thought you knew." She would not assume Hildred's ignorance until she was certain that the girl was unaware of what had happened.

"We?" echoed Hildred, incredulity struggling with a horrible suspicion. "We?"

"Yes," answered Hesper quietly, "your father and I."

"Father and you? But——" the words choked her.

"I see that he hasn't told you. I am very sorry. It was never my wish that you should be kept in ignorance." She checked herself, fearful of disloyalty to Ivors. She took the girl's limp hand in hers. "We were married last May."

"*Married?*" Hildred seemed incapable of other answer than horrified whispered repetition.

"Yes, married." Her lips trembled suddenly. "Won't you say something nice to me, Hildred? Won't you say at least that you are not—sorry? I—have gone through much—in these last days. I—I thought you liked me—a little." Her voice broke.

Some cord snapped and loosed Hildred's speech. She snatched away her hand and turned to face Hesper, her words coming incoherently.

"I did like you. I do like you. But it's all a dreadful mistake. I can't believe it. Father—you're *not* married. You *can't* be married."

Hesper drew herself up, and looked in wonder at the

girl's white strained face. Was she mad? Why did she say such absurd things? Mere resentment could not account for it.

"It's all a mistake. You can't be married!" she repeated wildly.

"Why not?"

"Because my mother is alive."

"Your mother is alive?"

"Yes."

By this time they had reached the house, and Hesper suddenly swayed and sat down on the verandah steps.

The whole scene seemed unreal, impossible.

The woman and the girl in the garden, saying unbelievable things to each other beneath a hard blue sky.

The steps were in shadow, and the trails of withering jasmine tapped lightly against them in a puff of wind. Once again Hesper's world had crashed about her ears. She had rebuilt it before, but now the fragments appeared infinitesimal. Something in falling seemed to have pierced her heart, and she had the odd fancy that she could feel it dripping slowly—drip, drip, drip, tears of blood. It did not really hurt—yet.

She looked up at Hildred, who stood above her, bewildered, indignant, miserable, caught in a swirl of scarcely realised emotions, not knowing what to say or what to do. She continued to ask incredible questions in a dull toneless voice.

"Your mother is really alive?"

"Yes."

"Was she alive last May?" What an absurd question! What inadequate things words were!

"Yes."

"Did—*he*—know?"

"Yes."

"You are sure?"

"He must have known."

"No possible doubt?" Even as she spoke Hesper knew that there was no doubt. Half-forgotten, un-comprehended memories, thronging from the past, gave her instant assurance of that. In that blinding flash much that had been hidden was laid bare.

"Not the faintest." Hildred put her hand to her throat as if to ward off a choking sensation. She felt a wild desire to scream, to run away, to do anything in order to escape from this quiet cross-examination. She could neither condone nor condemn. She was too near the event to see it in any true proportion, and the ghastly quietude and lack of sensation or drama only added to the poignancy of the scene.

There was a silence, which the song of Mahmud broke violently. The two women started. Hesper shivered.

"Then it was all a lie," she said dully. "All a lie from beginning to end. My beautiful life, my happiness, all a lie."

Hildred forced words. "No. If you were happy, you were happy. You had that."

"Hush, child. How should you know what I had, or what I've lost?" She covered her face with her hands, her body shaken by long, tearless sobs. "Oh, God! Oh, God!"

Hildred was miserably silent. She would have given much to be able to comfort this sorrow which lay too deep for tears, but she was helpless. The call

of her blood forced her to share in the wrong done to one who had given her best to both. But still, there in the hot sunshine the whole scene was tinged with unreality, and Hildred longed vaguely for anything that would end it, and bring about normality once more. She had an odd feeling that if anything happened she would awake and find that it had all been some impossible incredible nightmare.

The sight of the proud head humiliated to the dust, the hidden, tortured lips crying low upon God, hurt her with an actual physical pain. Tears rolled silently down her cheeks. She did not think of wiping them away.

Then something happened. A voice called in a husky whisper: "Hesper Belhasard!"

Hesper started and looked around her with wild terrified eyes, seeking escape and finding none.

"I can't go. I can't," she cried hoarsely.

The voice called again. Hildred moved forward.

"Can I——?"

Again Hesper looked about her desperately.

"No, he doesn't expect you. It might—Oh, how can I go?"

She covered her face with her hands again.

"Do let me."

"No, it is me he wants."

The voice called a third time, strained, petulant, and Nanno hurried round the corner of the verandah in evident agitation.

"Oh, Miss Hesper, ma'am, I've been looking for you. The master——" she stopped at the sight of the two white faces, the evident tension.

Hesper drew a long breath, a sigh that was half a sob.

"Here is Miss Ivors, Nanno. Be very good to her. She is worn out. She—her journey—take care of her. Coming, Ingram."

She went up the steps and along the verandah, slowly, with dragging feet, a heavy travesty of her usual free gait. She would have given all that she possessed to have been able to creep away into some remote corner where she could wrestle in solitude with what had befallen her, where she could find her soul again among the ruins of her life. If only she need not have faced Ingram for one brief hour.

She paused at the open window of his room, supporting herself with a hand on either side. The evening sun shining behind her threw her shadow athwart the polished floor in the form of a cross. So Ivors, looking towards her, saw her against the golden glow.

Their eyes met.

In that instant Ivors remembered all that had gone before—his sin, his chances of confession, his fears, his vacillation, his incessant punishment. Now standing on the borderland as he did, his vision suddenly pierced the cloud of things that are, and read in Hesper's eyes that she too knew. Caught in the meshes of a great fear, mute, incapable of speech or motion, in that tense moment of clearer vision he realised what he had wrought upon the one being who really loved him, and all his soul, crying dumbly in self-abasement, pleaded through his eyes, craved, besought.

Time was burnt like a scroll in the flame of the spirit

that rose between them : silence and the things of earth passed away, and the soul of the sinner saw, for his punishment, the soul of the sinned-against cry out against him before the Throne of Judgment, for the beautiful things he had deliberately murdered, her faith, her trust, her love.

Fearing all things, hoping nothing, the whole strength of his ebbing life was concentrated on the supreme effort of entreating Hesper's forgiveness.

She stood and met that look. Gradually all thought of self shrivelled before the fire of the spirit. Agony, disillusion, sense of betrayal were consumed in that pure flame, and all she remembered was that he, her dearest, was ill, dying perhaps, and that he needed her. His tense, white stillness, the mute agony of his gaze, pleaded more powerfully than words.

Oddly enough, his speech of that day among the golden hills flashed back to her.

" ' Does God care as you care ? ' As *I* care ? How do I care ? Won't he judge by that ? "

" Belhasard ? " the voice was a mere thread, a husky, anguished question.

She stumbled across the room to him with a little inarticulate murmur. In a moment her arms were round him.

" You forgive ? " his eyes asked.

" Sure, you know I love you," she cried, holding him to her as if she would never let him go, having said all.

CHAPTER X

ANOTHER ASPECT OF THE PROBLEM

THAT night Ivors lay between life and death.

To Hesper, who watched, the barrier seemed frail as spun glass and the night dark with the shadowing wings of the Angel of the Asphodel. Everything paled before the fear of losing him. She thought nothing of her wrong as she wrought with the dark angel for his life, and her heart was wrung as his husky whispers, half-sane, half-delirious betrayed the fear that had accompanied him as closely as his own footsteps.

Over and over again came the words—

“She cannot leave me now. She will not leave me now. She would have left me in the beginning if I had told her. I know she would. She is good. She is without sin. I have made her sin. No, it is I who have sinned. She is good. She will not leave me now. Hesper Belhasard . . .”

So ever and again round an endless circle, selfish love whipped by fear.

Hesper saw the love but not the selfishness, in that divine blindness which dulls the critical faculty in women who love as she did. Her voice, her touch were ever ready to soothe and comfort. Her patience welled inexhaustibly.

Once the murmuring voice broke into a laugh and startled her : the sound chimed so incongruously with the heaviness of her thoughts.

The weak fingers sought and clung tenaciously to her hand.

“ What if the friend happen to be God ? ” said Ivors very distinctly. Then he feebly put her hand under his cheek, turned on it and went to sleep.

Hesper could not move when he awoke. She was cramped and helpless, and Dr. Ayrton and Moussa carried her to her room while Nanno took charge of the patient.

“ I’ll be very good,” Ivors said. “ I’ll make Nanno tell me stories in her comfortable brogue, and I promise not to ask for Hesper, until I feel that I really cannot exist a moment longer without her.”

“ You’ll be good enough to speak when you’re spoken to and not till then,” said Dr. Ayrton gruffly. “ You’ve gone back points since yesterday.”

“ I’m going to get well now,” retorted Ivors, with his old smile.

“ See that you do. It will be the best return you can make your poor wife for her devotion.”

His poor wife ! How sweet, how piercingly sweet the words sounded ! She would not leave him. She was his wife in the sight of God, and it was one of the bitterest pangs of his punishment that he could not make her so in the eyes of man.

Another pang pricked him—would his recovery really be the best thing for Hesper ? Would she . . . he wondered. In his weakness slow tears rolled down his thin cheeks.

Nanno, startled, came and wiped them away.

"Now, sir, you mustn't be frettin'. Sure, a hot bath and a bit of a rest will make the mistress like herself again. 'Tis only the way she is a bit stiff-like from sittin' in the one position so long."

"Have I hurt her again? I didn't know."

"Sure, 'twas nothin' at all, sir, only the way she couldn't stir for fear of disturbin' you in your sleep."

"Even in my sleep," he murmured. "I must hurt her even in my sleep."

"Now, sir, 'tis a shame for you to be talkin'. Beside, Miss Hesper is one o' them that would rather have a hurt from the one they love than a kiss from e'er another."

"You needn't tell me what she is," he said, with a flash of his old spirit.

Then he lay silent for an infinity of time, longing to see her again, to know that she was within sight and touch, craving for her mere physical presence with the intense disproportionate desire of the invalid.

"How long is it since they left the room?" he asked suddenly.

"Just ten minutes, sir."

"Ten minutes!" he groaned. "And I meant to have done without her for an hour!"

"Would you like to see the young lady, sir?"

"Is Hildred here?" he asked languidly. He felt no sensation, neither surprise nor pleasure. It did not seem to matter whether she were here or not. Nothing mattered except Hesper.

Dr. Ayrton came suddenly into the room, and stood

by the bedside looking silently down on him for a moment.

"So you've an addition to your battalion of nurses!" he said at last. "We'll have to dismiss this one. She lets you talk too much. If I allow your daughter in to see you will you promise not to let it agitate you? If you talk or get excited I shall forbid her the room for the present."

"I promise," he answered. "Hildred will be a nice, cool person to look at."

"Very well, then."

Ivors did not realise what lay between him and Hildred. He vaguely connected her coming with Hesper's knowledge, but the thought had no power to trouble him. Hesper knew: she loved him: she had forgiven him. That was all that mattered. She would not leave him. But she had left him! Oh, how he wanted her!

He groaned again, and moved feebly. In an instant Nanno was bending over him.

"What is it, acuth?" she asked, as if he were a child.

"I want Hesper," he murmured with closed eyes.

"She'll come to you the very minute she's able, sir. Sure she's been watchin' all night, and she must have a bit to eat, the poor lamb."

"I won't be selfish, but tell her to come as soon as she can. If she only knew how I wanted her——" he sighed heavily.

It was with mingled feelings that Hildred received Dr. Ayrton's summons.

She had realised that sooner or later she would have

to face her father, and she shrank inexpressibly from the ordeal. She had slept the sleep of exhaustion during the night, and the watchers had not disturbed her ; therefore she was rested in body and consequently capable of clearer perception than she had been when the long strain of her journey had culminated in the final blow.

Although she had never idealised her father the shock was a severe one, and the old sense of resentment arose within her when she thought that she was the medium through which the wound of knowledge had been dealt to Hesper.

Through a woman's eyes she had seen, as thrice before, a glimpse of the depths so carefully hidden beneath the surface : she had seen a soul in anguish and it was her innocent hand which had struck the blow. Verily, the sins of the fathers

"Oh, it's unfair ! It's unfair !" she cried with clenched hands.

To the clear, pitiless eyes of youth no extenuating circumstances appeared. Her father had deliberately sinned against Hesper, against her mother, and against herself. He had, with all the arts at his command—and they were many and insidious, the girl acknowledged to herself with a bitter little smile—striven to win a love to which he had no right, legally or morally. He had sinned against Heaven and before the world, and had humbled and brought to the dust the proudest woman Hildred had ever known. Three characteristics of Hesper rose saliently before her, pride, purity, and generosity, in its widest sense. At each of these had he struck. Two he had slain, thought the stern

young judge, and the third he had wounded past belief. She would never forget how Hesper had looked yesterday, never, never, never. She thought she now knew something of what one would feel who had slain unwittingly. And her father, who had committed the crime, who had done this incredibly wicked, cruel thing, had slipped away from the consequences, and made himself, by his illness and weakness, the centre of his universe as usual.

What rankled most in Hildred was the sense of injustice done ; that she, who had left her beloved work in England to rush off to Egypt, hot haste, in response to her father's wish, should have been chosen to deal this blow to one for whom she really cared, and that he, with his usual selfish facility, should have shuffled the burden of his responsibility on to the shoulders of another.

In that bitter moment the girl felt that she hated the two beings who had given her birth : that she was the most cruelly wronged of all. Hesper had had her few months of perfect happiness—"the beautiful life that was all a lie!" What a world of sad suggestion the simple words conveyed! Her mother could not be really affected by any action of her father's. It was she who was the tool of their circumstances, she who was flung about like a shuttlecock by their caprices. Was she never to have any life of her own?

The thought of Dr. Lisle, who had seen her off at Waterloo, flashed suddenly across her mind and brought a quick sense of warmth to her sore heart.

"My cage of dreams is very strong now," he had said, with an odd fire in his blue eyes, "and very full.

If I show them to you when you come back will you promise not to open the door and let them fly away ? ”

“ Isn’t it rather a pity to keep them caged ? ” she had answered—a soft young Hildred who was only known to this little brown man.

“ You mustn’t let them go again.”

“ Again ? ”

“ Have you forgotten that day in the wood ? ” he asked in return. “ The day we feasted on wild fruit ? The day I had—my hour ? ”

“ Did I, then ? ” she asked flushing.

He nodded. “ What’s more, you clapped your hands to make them fly all the faster.” He took one of the offending hands in his as he spoke. “ Do you think you have grown any wiser ? ”

She blushed deeper. “ I—don’t know.”

At that moment Time, the mischief-maker, had caused the guard to blow his whistle.

“ Good-bye,” said Dr. Lisle. “ Take care of yourself. I hope you will find your father better, also that you will seek wisdom in the East.”

“ I’ll look for it, at any rate.”

“ Whatever you find be sure to come back—to me,” she thought he added, but his last words were lost in the movement of the train.

The thought, indefinite as it was, softened her. Dr. Lisle was the one person who always understood. He, at all events, desired her friendship. She stood for something in his life. What was the true wisdom ? Where should she seek it ?

At this moment Dr. Ayrton broke in upon her musings with his summons.

He glanced approvingly at her trim, white-clad figure, her clear look of health, and her soft fair hair.

"No agitation, my dear young lady," he said.

"I am a nurse myself," she replied with a touch of dignified reproof which amused him vastly. "At least I am learning to be one."

"Then you ought to know something of the great essentials, patience and sympathy," he retorted. "Your father is in a precarious state. Humanly speaking it is your mother who has kept him alive." A slight stiffening of the girlish figure checked him.

"She's not your mother, surely?"

"No."

"I thought not. She's too young to be anything but your stepmother. Your father's a lucky man. She's a fine creature, a fine creature," he repeated musingly. Then he stopped and looked at Hildred.

"She's nearly worn out now. I see a great change in her even since yesterday. You must take care of her now that you've come. Ivors will hardly let her out of his sight, and she has no thought but for him. She is absolutely selfless."

"It's not an Ivors' failing," said Hildred. The hardness of her tone surprised the doctor.

"Ah, you've got to learn men and women yet," was all he said. "We're all only human beings at best, and I dare say Mrs. Ivors has her flaws as well as the rest of us. I'm bound to say, though, I've never seen 'em. Here we are. There's nothing to be frightened of."

Hildred paused upon the threshold, shrinking from

the inevitable. Her heart beat quickly and she would have given worlds to be able to run away.

"This is sheer cowardice," she thought to herself. "It must be done."

She lifted her head and went in.

The room with its round Moorish arches looked big, and bare, and dim, as everything that could exclude the air had been removed. The French windows which opened on to the verandah had their green sun-shutters down, but here and there a shaft of sunlight penetrated and shone in a little dancing pool of light on the polished boards.

Ivors' bed was drawn near one of the windows, and he lay white and still amid its whiteness. Hildred had expected to see a change from the debonair man from whom she had parted, not without a qualm, in Cairo, but the reality came with a shock. All vitality seemed to be concentrated in his eyes—the thin limbs, sunken cheeks, and damp hair seemed to have little left of life—and those eyes, dark and wistful, met Hildred's as she entered, with the mute appeal of a dog's.

"Is that you, little girl?" he said in a husky whisper.

She sprang forward, all her bitter thoughts melting into pity.

"Oh, father! father!" she cried, stooping to kiss him.

"Sit there, and let me look at you," he said.

Nanno brought a basket chair forward.

"Not that horrid thing, it creaks. Oh, no, not on the end of my bed. I can't bear people to sit on my bed."

"Not so much talking, my good man," put in Dr. Ayrton. "You may look at Miss Ivors as much as you like, but unlimited conversation is not allowed. Now remember." He went away.

Hildred noticed a wicker-covered flask of eau-de-cologne on a table. "Would you like me to put some of that on your forehead?" she asked. "I could fan you after. It's very cooling."

"Thanks."

She deftly touched him with the tips of her fingers, soothingly moving his lank hair.

"You've nice hands," he murmured after a while. "I always said so."

Everything still bore an air of unreality to Hildred. She had never imagined that people could touch tragedy so quietly. She did not yet realise the narcotic power of illness, and had never come in contact with the broken words and halting phrases with which the proud decently cover their hurt, jealous of its sight by any eyes other than their own.

That her father could still be impatient, petulant, came to her with a little shock of surprise.

Her months among the children had taught her a good deal and broadened her mental outlook, but she had still much to learn.

"Think largely," Mrs. Marston, the matron, used to say to her. "Even the wisest person only sees life from a limited standpoint, so it behoves us all to try to *think* largely."

She would try to think largely now, to readjust her old rigid standards of right and wrong to this new complex problem, to realise the inner meaning of the tragedy

in which they were all involved, and above all not to condemn too harshly.

Ivors grew restless. He moved his head upon the pillow : he raised weak hands and let them fall again : he coughed huskily : he sighed.

“ What is it ? ” Hildred asked.

“ Hesper,” he answered. “ I really cannot do without her for one moment longer. I have been a marvel of patience, but not a second more. Go and tell her.”

“ But she’s tired. She—You ought——” began Hildred disapprovingly.

Ivors looked up at her with a glance which mingled his old whimsicality with a new and yearning deprecation.

“ O wise young judge,” he whispered hoarsely. “ You can’t afford to cast a stone. Why did you ever leave me ? ”

“ Father ! ” Hildred gasped, flushed, and went hurriedly out of the room.

It was the final touch—to make *her* responsible for his weakness, to saddle *her* with his sins, to rate *her* omission, if it were an omission, with his commission, to reproach *her*, whom he had wronged among the rest.

Still, under his words lay a truth which pierced and stung : an Ithuriel truth whose spear-touch revealed her own self-deception, and brought home the fact that she, too, might have erred ; that she, too, was not without reproach ; that, as her father had said, she should not be the first to cast a stone.

If she had remained with him this could never have happened. With a tingling conscience she remembered

the hint of appeal in his manner at Luxor : the half-confidence, the request that he would not make, to which she had deliberately shut her ears. Was it possible that instead of being noble and self-sacrificing in her desire to devote her life to the sick and suffering she had but echoed the selfishness which she so strongly condemned ?

All the things which had made her life beautiful, her dreams, her love of art, her aspirations, suddenly fell away. She was face to face with the naked truth now, and she could not look at it unashamed.

Hastily summoning Moussa she gave him the message for Hesper, and went out to the side of the verandah which was in shadow to take counsel with her surging thoughts, alone.

CHAPTER XI

THE SOLUTION

WHEN Ivors slept that afternoon Hesper went in search of Hildred. She found her curled up on a big divan in the drawing-room near a latticed window reading a letter.

The girl sprang up as she entered.

"You look half dead," she cried. "Rest here on the divan and put your feet up."

"I am half dead," answered Hesper quietly, "but it doesn't matter. Don't move, child. I have been resting on the couch in your father's room. He is asleep now, so I slipped away. I wanted to see you."

Her voice was dull, toneless: she bore the same resemblance to the woman who had welcomed Hildred yesterday as a waxen image does to its living prototype. Some spring seemed to have been broken within her, some vital essence destroyed. Her answer to Hildred's comment sounded startlingly true. She looked half dead, and her voice, when she spoke, seemed to come from far away.

"I wanted to see you," she said again. "I think it is better to talk this thing out."

"Oh, must we?" cried Hildred, shrinking.

"I think we must. The fact of shutting one's eyes and pretending a thing isn't there won't prevent it from staring us in the face the moment we open them again. I thought we might confront it once for all, and then——" she raised her hands and let them fall with a gesture of finality.

"As you like," answered Hildred uncomfortably. "You are the person to be considered. It is your right——"

"Don't!" Hesper sat for a moment looking at her wedding-ring and turning it mechanically on her finger. Then she lifted her head suddenly. "What is your mother to you, Hildred?"

The girl reddened from neck to brow.

"An instinct, no more," she answered, crumpling the letter she held in her hand with a quick fierce gesture.

"Can you tell me anything—of the circumstances—? I don't want to hurt you, but I must ask—this once."

"I—they——" the girl paused awkwardly.

"Can't you see that I want some reasons, something to make me understand?" said Hesper in quickened tones. "I *want* to understand."

Her voice broke pitifully and Hildred in response told her what she knew, all the bald, ugly story of selfishness and neglect of duty.

"My mother loves no one except her dogs," Hildred concluded warmly. "I wrote to her before I came away to tell her about—about father, and I have just had this letter from her. Will you read it, just to see her point of view, or will it hurt you?"

"Nothing else can ever hurt me."

Hildred handed her the letter. "It was written shortly after I started, but it travelled quicker than I did. I am glad, glad that I arrived before I got it. I want to be your friend, Hesper, if you will let me."

"That's generous of you, child," said Hesper, opening the letter.

It displayed a cold disregard for her husband's health and deplored the flightiness of Hildred's mind which had led her to abandon her chosen career and dash off half across the world because her father imagined himself to be ill. It was short and was signed "her sincere H. D. Ivors," but, like the scorpion, its sting lay in its tail. There was a long and hastily-added postscript, tacked on because she had not time to write another letter to catch that mail. She had met the Waveneys, she said, and Laura had been coming to tell her a shocking piece of news which she had heard from a cousin who was staying at the Cataract Hotel at Assuan. "Not to put too fine a point on it, it was to the effect that your father is living with a woman on some island near the place. I will not presume to dictate, Hildred, but I hope that you will have sufficient sense of what is *due to yourself* to leave the place at once. Wire me what boat you are coming by and I will meet you." A cheque for fifty pounds dropped out of the envelope, as Hesper replaced the letter with trembling fingers.

In spite of her brave assertion there still remained a vulnerable spot, and this letter had hurt it cruelly. In the midst of her pain and grief she had never dreamed for a moment that any one could consider her sinful or her presence contaminating. The conventional,

uncomprehending view of the situation had never occurred to her, and the thought that any one could consider her purity smirched was a new and stinging revelation. She turned away her face for a moment to hide her quivering lips, and gradually the lesser pain merged into the greater.

"She is a hard, narrow woman," cried Hildred. "I don't want her money. I have plenty of my own. She does not know how cruelly wronged you have been."

"Hush! She is hard and narrow, perhaps, but she is your mother, Hildred."

"She has never been a mother to me, any more than she was a wife to him."

At that Hesper drew herself erect, and a light burned in her eyes.

"Ah, there," she said, speaking quickly, "there she has much to be forgiven. If it comes to that, it is she who is living in sin rather than I. She, a married woman, ought to have realised something of the temptations to which she exposed him when she cast him adrift, young and impetuous as he was. She sinned against God and man, against him and you, when she did so. She broke her solemn promises to satisfy her own selfish pride. The sin is hers, not mine. I deny that I have sinned, that I am sinning——" she stopped.

Hildred was flushed and troubled: her thoughts were incoherent, her sympathies swayed.

"But what will you do eventually?" she asked at last, feeling to the full the awkwardness of such a question. "Will you—surely you will—leave him?"

"I will never leave him."

"But——"

"He will leave me," said Hesper very low.

Hildred gasped. This solution had not occurred to her. Yet, though the words came as a shock, she realised, subconsciously, that they were not altogether a surprise, for she had seen a shadow on her father's face—a shadow with which her winter's work had sadly familiarised her.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure. Dr. Ayrton told me so to-day." Then her calm broke and she covered her face with her hands. "Oh, God, he will leave me, and I shall be alone in a cold world again."

Hildred put her arms round her. Her heart was wrung at the sight of Hesper's grief. It seemed so pitifully hard that she, the innocent, should suffer so poignantly, while those who had wronged her—she paused on the thought. How did she know what her father had endured? How could any one even dimly conjecture the processes of another's mind, the bitterness of another's pangs? In the eyes of the world Hesper had wronged her mother, while, to those who knew, it was Mrs. Ivors who had, indirectly, wronged Hesper. It was the stone thrown into the pool of life, whose circles, ever widening, touched other circles undreamed of.

Who could tell? Who should dare to judge? So some sense of the scope of life and its larger issues came to the girl's troubled mind.

Hesper disengaged herself gently, and looked up with dry burning eyes.

"Don't be kind to me. I can't afford to give way just now. He needs me too sorely."

"Hesper, do you ever think of yourself?" cried Hildred, wondering at a greater love than her starved life had ever seen.

"I think of myself when I think of him," Hesper answered. "It is all the same. It was that way almost from the beginning. We are really one, Hildred."

"You feel like that for *father*?" All the wonder of one generation at the needs and desires of an older rang in her tone.

"I do. Ah, child, how should you understand?" she drew an impatient breath, checked herself and continued: "We have given each other what no one else in the world could have given us. I would have given him anything I had. I *have* given him everything I had." She raised her hands again and let them fall with the same hopeless gesture. "Without knowing."

"If you had known?"

"Ah, how could I answer such a question now?" She turned her ring again, and Hildred noticed how thin her hands had grown.

"Hildred——"

"Yes?"

"Do you want—to stay?"

"To stay?"

Hesper looked up with a sudden red flame on her cheek. "I never thought—it did not occur to me what—what outside people might think or say. If—it would harm you—in any way——"

"Harm me to be with you?"

Hesper nodded, shamed, humiliated beyond words.

The girl took the hand with the ring on it between her own two warm ones and kissed it.

"I am proud to be with you," she said, tears quick as rain falling down her cheeks.

"Child, you mustn't cry. Don't! I can't stand it."

There was a silence in the room. A low wind moaned outside and filled the air with its hot breath. A yellowish haze obscured the blue of the sky, and the *sakîyeh* creaked and purred unaccompanied to-day by song.

"I'm afraid it's blowing up for a *khamâsin*," said Hesper. "I hate these hot winds and these sand-storms. Ingram always said that their electricity invigorated him, but now—it's so bad for him. You *are* good to me, Hildred," she said suddenly. "It's such an impossible situation altogether. Your mother——"

"Don't talk of her, please."

"But I must talk of her," Hesper gently insisted.

"I would not come between you for the world."

"There is nothing of that sort," Hildred began.

"Ah, child, there is," Hesper interposed. "You, in your generosity, are all for championing me, and that would create an instant breach."

"There is a breach already."

"Don't widen it, then. Your mother loves you, Hildred. You are all she has. Don't take that from her."

"I assure you that you're mistaken. She doesn't care a jot for me. Games and dogs——"

"Ah, no, Hildred. Those who love always know love when they see it. I saw it in every line of that cold, hard letter. It cried out in jealousy for you, in the words that jibed at you for rushing to your father away from her, in her care for your reputation, in her thought in sending you money which you might need, in her wish to meet you on your return."

"I don't want her money," cried the girl resentfully. "And as for my reputation it can't be worth much if it is so easily tarnished. She may be jealous, as you say——"

"Jealousy implies love, Hildred. It's the mother instinct asserting itself at last."

"How do you know?"

"I've been face to face with big things lately," answered Hesper simply, "and when the little things are stripped away one sees more clearly. Besides, there's a lot of the child in every man. Perhaps that's how I know."

Hildred looked at her curiously. "You don't understand my mother, Hesper. You have nothing in common with her type."

"She's a woman, isn't she? And she's your mother."

"It's odd that you should defend her to me, Hesper."

Hesper flushed again. "Oh, I'm not defending her. I think she has acted both wickedly and foolishly, but I have a great pity for her because she wilfully threw away the best things of life and picked up rubbish instead."

All at once the girl softened.

"You're a good woman," she said. "A good, good woman."

"Ah, my dear——"

Moussa entered noiselessly.

"Master awake. Wants the *sitt*."

Hesper rose. "Will you come, child?"

"No, he doesn't want me," Hildred answered. "No one really wants me," she thought as Hesper hurriedly left the room.

Then a vision of her mother ready to come and meet her was evoked by Hesper's words; and Dr. Lisle's warm insistence on her return suddenly rang in her ears with more than a tinge of reproach.

She smiled to herself and felt vaguely comforted. Then remembering the shadow of death which brooded over the island she chid herself for heartlessness, and thought anew upon the depth and height of Hesper's love, before which her own little rushlight of affection paled its ineffectual fire.

CHAPTER XII

LOVE TRIUMPHANT

HESPER found Ivors propped up in bed with pillows. His eyes were clear and bright, and a spot of colour burned in either cheek.

He greeted her with a smile and a weak air of triumph—the pitiful travesty of his former buoyancy.

“I got Moussa and Nanno to lift me up. I felt choked lying down. A *khamâsin* is brewing, I think I feel it tingling through me.”

“As usual,” she said, sitting down next him, and speaking in her softest tones. The waves of her black hair were loosened, and emphasised the whiteness of her face.

“As usual. I feel ever so much better. If old Ayrton would only let me move to some cooler spot I should get well in no time.”

“In no time,” she echoed, the sentence ringing in her ears. Then she roused herself. “You are not strong enough for the journey yet, dearest.”

“Am I still your dearest?” he asked in the husky whisper which always thrilled her with fear. It pierced her heart to hear it, yet every time he slept she dreaded lest she should never hear it again.

“Always.”

“Through life and death?”

"Through life and death."

"Up in your high, white heaven?"

"Up——" her voice failed.

"You'll wait there till I come, won't you?" he persisted.

"For ever if need be."

"Ah, not for ever. God is pitiful to sinners. You taught me that."

"I?"

"Ah, beloved, I feel all the more because I cannot speak. I know. I repent. If *you*—if *you* can forgive how should any omniscient God be less merciful?"

"Hush, my very dearest. You mustn't talk. You must not agitate yourself."

"It is worse for me to keep silent. Just this once, Belhasard, and then I'll do everything I can to get well. I want to get well in order to—atone."

Every word hurt. How could she tell him? What did it matter after all? Confession had been made for him: she had forgiven: by the light of her love he perceived the shadow of Love Eternal.

"If—I had told you beforehand would you have left me?" he whispered.

"Why worry about that now?"

"But would you?" he persisted.

"I—think so," she answered slowly, stroking the dry, transparent hand she held.

"Then I'm glad I didn't," he said huskily.

"So am I," she answered, flushing. "It may be wicked of me, but I am—glad—to have had what I had—all those beautiful months, all that wonderful happiness——"

"Wicked? You?" he interrupted.

"Perhaps it isn't the best part of me that's glad," said Hesper, wistfully. "I don't know. At any rate, for a time, I tasted perfect happiness. That is more than most people can say. You gave it to me."

She hid away her wounded faith, her betrayed trust. She loved him: the matter of atonement lay between him and God. She loved him, and she must lose him.

In spite of her words some sudden apprehension seized him.

"You won't leave me?" he pleaded, clutching at her hand.

"Never, my dearest, never."

"Ah, I never felt sure. You good women—your sense of right and wrong is so strong. So——"

"Hush, my dearest. I am sure it is bad for you to talk so much."

A sudden fear pricked her that she might have fallen in his estimation by consenting so easily to remain with him.

"You don't think any the worse of me?" she began in a low voice.

"My fixed star shines high in the heaven above me," he answered, understanding at once. "I don't know how you stooped to such a worm as I, Hesper Belhasard. Do you remember the night at Minia when you danced into my heart? You came lightly in——"

"It was never lightly. I strove against you at first."

"It was no use. . . . Now you know why I ran away."

"Now I know."

"Now you understand why I could not leave you at Capri."

Hesper was silent.

"You do, don't you?" The whisper sharpened a little, and he tried to see her face.

"Now—I—understand," she cried at last in anguish.

"Oh, Ingram—Ingram."

She hid her face in his pillow. Long sobs rent her.

"Hesper, don't. I can't bear it," he cried weakly.

She checked herself with an effort.

"Darling, forgive me. I am sorry," she said under her breath. "I did not mean to distress you. I think the *khamâsin* has upset me."

The hot wind moaned round the house, filtering fine sand upon the floor.

"It is doing me good," he said. "I feel ever so much better."

"That's right."

"This pillow isn't very comfortable, though."

"What can I do to make it easier?"

"You can sit on the bed next me, and put your arms round me, and let me lay my head against you instead."

In an instant her arms were round him, and he was raised very gently, his head sinking on the desired resting-place.

"Ah, how soft and sweet you are," he murmured, with a weary sigh. "After all, I feel a little tired now. I think I could sleep."

"Do, my dearest."

Her arms held him closely, tenderly. She crooned inarticulately as she rested her cheek against his head.

The wind howled outside—the strange wind that

was hot instead of being cold. A sudden gust rattled the sun-shutters.

"Who is that?" asked Ivors, rousing.

"Only the wind, beloved."

He looked up and smiled at her. "I thought it might be some one coming to take you from me."

She held him closer.

"I feel safe when your arms are round me like that," he whispered. "When I am better I will hold you so closely that no one can take you from me."

"You never held me closer than now, dearest," she whispered back. She did not dare to trust her voice.

"Ah, wait until we go adventuring again." His head slipped down a little, and she pillowed it softly above her beating heart.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Very comfortable. Stoop down and kiss me before I go to sleep."

"Are you tired?"

"Not now."

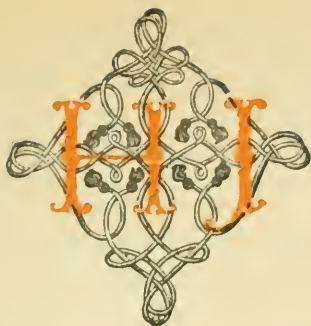
"Only sleepy?"

"Only sleepy and happy," he murmured. "Don't let the others in. We don't want any one else—you and I. Do we, Hesper Belhasard?"

"No," she answered.

The Eastern night fell suddenly through the yellow twilight and still Hesper sat holding Ivors to her heart, protecting him from intrusion.

She did not know the moment when the Unbidden Guest entered and, summoning him from that desired bourne, set out with him upon the last Great Adventure.



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